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BESTSELLER
MYSTERY MAGAZINE

SEPTEMBER 35¢

A MERCURY MP PUBLICATION

FIRST-CLASS MURDER

By Doris Miles Disney

A lovely girl with a secret, a blackmailer, and sudden death

"Fast-moving... excellent... sound all the way."
SATURDAY REVIEW

Mousetrapped . . . . . NEILL C. WILSON
Silhouette of a Killer . . . . T. E. BROOKS
Pour on Water . . . . . LEE HAYS
The Visitor . . . . . RICHARD WINKLER

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BESTSELLER MYSTERY MAGAZINE

Sept. 1959 *Including* MERCURY MYSTERY MAGAZINE

The Library of Distinctive Mystery Fiction

FIRST-CLASS MURDER *Doris Miles Disney* 5

The tall, attractive woman told Postal Inspector Madden a story of blackmail, but she refused to do anything about it. He would see her again, Madden thought, when she came to the end of her rope. . . . And he did see her again, but this time the occasion was not blackmail, but murder.

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The fat man's racket was a beaut—so was the girl

Silhouette of a Killer *T. E. Brooks* 106

His memory had gone, but the handcuffs he wore had not

Pour on Water *Lee Hays* 113

A burning cotton gin, and a skunk of the first water

The Visitor *Richard Winkler* 118

If Margaret could only think of just the right words, the killer might not strike

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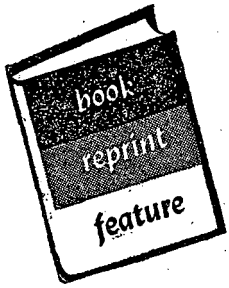

Alma Walbridge was an elegant young woman who was not at all the sort to be making blackmail payments. She confessed to having made two, however—and when a battered corpse was found in her back yard, Police Chief Schreiner was certain she had made a third, this time with the business end of a wrench. Postal Inspector Madden had more faith in Alma, and his investigation opens explosive new angles, which lead to a startling climax.

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FIRST-CLASS MURDER

by ***DORIS MILES DISNEY***

CHAPTER ONE

Inspector David Madden was at his desk in the Dunston Federal Building when the call came in. He picked up the receiver and said, "Inspector Madden."

"Oh," a feminine voice said, and then, "I wonder if I could make an appointment to come in and see you, Inspector, about some rather unpleasant letters I've been receiving?" The low clear voice fell agreeably on Madden's ear.

He asked, "What kind of unpleasant letters have you been receiving?"

"Well, they're——"

"Obscene? Scurrilous?"

"Oh no, nothing like that. But I'd prefer not to talk about them on the phone. May I have an appointment to see you?"

The inspector gave thought to his schedule for the next day. He asked, "Would tomorrow morning at nine o'clock be convenient for you?"

"Yes, that would be fine. Is your office upstairs in the post office building?"

"The second floor, Room 285. May I have your name, please?"

"My—name? It's, uh—Sampson. Mrs. Grace Sampson."

Not her real name, he thought,

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writing it down. He said, "All right, Mrs. Sampson, I'll see you tomorrow at nine," and hung up.

He wouldn't have been surprised if the woman had not appeared the next morning; her tone and manner on the telephone had left that impression on him. But she arrived at exactly nine o'clock, a slim, tall woman only about three inches shorter than the inspector's own five feet eleven. She had beautiful red hair with lots of gold in it and a mere trace of carrot. She wasn't pretty, her nose was too large, her chin too square for prettiness, but her face had a kind of bony elegance that caught the eye. Her clothes were unobtrusively expensive, a well-cut gray wool suit, black broadtail jacket, big black leather handbag. She was, David Madden thought, about thirty years old.

He took her in his office and drew a chair up beside his desk. "Won't you sit down, Mrs. Sampson," he said.

"Thank you." She sat down, loosening her fur jacket and removing her gloves, dark gray eyes fixed on him uncertainly.

He let a silence fall, waiting for her to begin. She said, "I think the letters I spoke to you about come under your jurisdiction, Inspector. Someone's writing me to ask for money." She brought this out with nervous haste.

"Do you know who's doing it?"

"No." Her glance met his briefly and flicked away again. "There's never a signature."

"Do you mean someone's using the mails in an attempt to blackmail you, Mrs. Sampson?"

She had the kind of transparently fair skin that changes color readily. It turned bright pink as she said, "Yes."

"More than one demand for money has been made?"

"Yes. The one in the letter that came yesterday is the third."

The inspector leaned back in his chair, his thin, dark face devoid of expression, accepting the fact that this interesting-looking young woman with the lovely speaking voice had some hidden place in her life that laid her open to blackmail. What it was did not need to concern him, but momentarily he let himself speculate on it. It would have something to do with sex, he thought; what else could it be with a woman of her class and type? She looked as if her past would be impeccable.

"You've met the demands on the other two occasions, Mrs. Sampson?"

"Yes." Her embarrassment increased. She couldn't meet his gaze at all, her color deepened still more.

"It never seems to do any good to pay, does it?" he observed. "Blackmailers keep coming back for more."

She caught the note of sympathy in his voice and raised her

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eyes to his. "I've found that out for myself," she said. "I've paid out five thousand dollars in two installments, and now this third demand has been made."

"All three of them were made by mail?"

"Yes."

"Do you have the letters with you?"

"I brought the latest one," She opened her handbag and produced the letter.

It was typewritten on a white bond 8½-by-11 paper that could be purchased at any stationery store. There was neither a salutation nor a signature. The message ran:

Your situation hasn't changed but mine has. In spite of all my good resolutions not to ask you for more money I find myself short again. I'll need the same amount as before. Put the money in the clothespin bag on Friday, December 16. Leave your house as soon as it's dark and don't come back until nine o'clock.

Madden laid the letter on his desk. "You received this yesterday, Mrs. Sampson?"

"Yes, it was in my morning mail."

He glanced at his desk calendar. This was Thursday, December 8. The payment was due a week from tomorrow. She had been given time to get the money together.

"May I see the envelope it came in?" he asked.

"I didn't bring the envelope."

"But you've saved it?"

"Oh yes. All the envelopes and letters."

The inspector eyed her considerингly. She hadn't brought the envelope because her real name and her address were on it. He was now certain that her name wasn't Sampson.

"Was the envelope typewritten too?"

"Yes."

"What was the postmark?"

"Dunston. Each one has had a different postmark but they've all been mailed in this area."

"And you put the money in your clothespin bag?"

"Yes. It hangs on the clothes reel near the edge of a wood that runs in back of the houses on my side of the street."

"Then the blackmailer, from this strip of woods, could study the layout of your place without being seen?"

"Oh yes. It's not just a strip of woods. It's a large wooded section."

"Both the other times you paid, you did it after receiving only one letter?"

"Yes."

Keeping her secret was of the utmost importance to her or she wouldn't have paid so promptly, the inspector was reflecting as he said, "And now it's becoming too

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much for you to meet these payments."

He spoke in a matter-of-fact tone, trying to ease her embarrassment, to sound as if being vulnerable to blackmail and paying out money to avoid exposure of some disgraceful episode in one's life were an everyday matter.

"Yes, it is." She leaned forward to put out her cigarette in the ash tray on his desk. The burning color on her face had spread down over her throat into the V-neck of her blouse. She sent him an inquiring glance. "It is the sort of thing you're supposed to investigate, isn't it?"

"Using the mails to extort money? I should say so." He smiled at her. "We'll do our best to put a stop to it, Mrs. Sampson."

She eyed him steadily. "And what would happen if you caught the person responsible for it?"

"Well, we'd turn our evidence over to the United States Attorney. It's a federal offense, you see. The blackmailer would be arrested on a federal warrant."

"Oh." She was silent for an interval, twisting back and forth the diamond ring she wore above her wedding band. She said finally, "That would mean—well, when the case came to trial my troubles would become public property."

"Not necessarily. We'd make every effort we could to spare you unpleasant publicity, Mrs. Sampson."

"But you couldn't guarantee it, could you?"

"I'm afraid not. I haven't any idea where the investigation might lead or what it might uncover."

"Isn't there some way you could handle it, though, so there wouldn't be the risk of publicity? If you found out who is blackmailing me and gave this person a warning that it had to stop and—" She broke off as he shook his head. Then she said, "Why couldn't it be done that way when I'm the injured party and don't want this person brought to trial? All I want is to have the blackmail stopped."

Again David Madden shook his head. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Sampson, but we don't work that way in the service. You're suggesting that I should let someone guilty of a serious crime go free with a warning. I couldn't do it."

"Oh. I didn't realize—" She gave him a forlornly apologetic smile. "I guess I'm not thinking about this very intelligently. I ought to have known—" She came to a halt. A moment later she said slowly, "I'll have to drop the whole thing, Inspector. I can't take the chance that there might be publicity. It could do too much injury, not just to me but to someone else, a perfectly innocent person."

Was it her husband? Madden asked himself. Did the thing she was being blackmailed over predate her marriage or was it of later

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origin? Perhaps a former lover who had some proof of the indiscretion?

While these questions occupied Madden's mind he asked, "Mrs. Sampson, don't you have any idea who's blackmailing you?"

"None at all. I've thought and thought about it but I can't imagine who it is or where the information that's being used was obtained."

Her lovely low voice carried conviction to the inspector. She didn't know who was blackmailing her. If it was a former lover she didn't know it.

He said, "The fact that you're getting letters instead of telephone calls indicates that you do know this person, Mrs. Sampson. Typewriters can be traced; telephone calls would be much safer unless there were the risk that you would recognize the voice."

She stared at him in surprise. "I hadn't thought of that. It's not a very nice thought either. Someone I know——"

"It seems quite likely just the same."

She sighed. "I suppose so. But I'd much rather it was a stranger." She stopped short and gave him a troubled smile. "I mustn't take up any more of your time with my personal problems. May I have my letter back?"

David Madden handed it to her with a feeling of reluctance. He wanted to help her, but she was refusing his help. He couldn't resist an effort to change her mind. He said, "Mrs. Sampson, I've been a postal inspector for many years and this wouldn't be the first blackmail case I've investigated. I'm afraid you're making a mistake in not filing a complaint on it. A blackmailer's demands just go on and on, you know, until his victim can no longer meet them. Have you given it thought from that angle?"

"Yes, I have." Her gray eyes met his resolutely. "But I'll have to find some way to handle it myself. I have no right to risk publicity that would injure the innocent person I mentioned. I just can't file a complaint." She was opening her handbag as she spoke. She put the letter back in it.

There was nothing more Madden could say, no action he could take in the face of her attitude. In silence he watched the letter disappear.

She stood up, drawing her fur jacket around her. "Thank you, Mr. Madden. I'm sorry I took up your time."

"Not at all." He got to his feet. "If you change your mind, Mrs. Sampson, don't hesitate to get in touch with me."

"Thank you, I'll do that," she said. They exchanged polite smiles, he opened the door of his office for her, and she went out through the outer door that opened on the corridor.

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CHAPTER TWO

At one o'clock one night during the last week of December Gertrude Trepp went to the phone and dialed the police department. It was answered at once by a brisk voice that said, "Police Deparment, Sergeant Bocca."

She tried to speak calmly. "This is Mrs. Arthur Trepp calling, Sergeant. I wonder if you know my husband?"

"I think I do, Mrs. Trepp. He's a mailman, isn't he?"

"Yes. I'm calling because he hasn't come home and it's getting so late that I'm afraid he may have met with some accident. He's been gone six hours and he didn't expect to be as late as this, I'm sure."

"He had an appointment with a woman on Woodside Avenue. I don't know exactly what it was about, it was some business matter, but it shouldn't have kept him this long. He walked over there—he doesn't drive, we don't own a car—suppose he had a fall or met with some other kind of accident?"

"I see what you mean." Sergeant Bocca was mentally reviewing what he knew of mailman Trepp. Quiet little man, not known to drink or chase around—didn't even drive a car, it seemed—lived quietly with his wife. . . . But what about this woman?

"You don't know the name of the woman your husband went to see, Mrs. Trepp?"

"No."

"It was about a business matter, you said?"

"Yes."

He caught the faint note of reservation in her reply as she added, "I don't really know anything about it."

"Well, I'll send the cruiser over to take a look around. Let's see, you live on . . . ?"

"Haight Street just beyond the corner of Latham. Going to Woodside Avenue, I should think my husband would walk the length of Latham, then along Grant to Woodside. That would be the shortest way for him to go."

"Yes, it would. I'll send the cruiser over to take a look around in that area. He may be on his way home now or he may still be at the woman's house."

"Yes, I know, but it's getting so late. He has to be at the post office at seven and he's nearly always in bed before eleven o'clock. It's not like him to be out at this hour. That's why I feel worried about him."

"Well, we'll try to locate him for you, Mrs. Trepp."

"Then will you call me back?"

"Yes, I'll do that. What's your phone number?"

Mrs. Trepp gave the police officer her phone number, thanked him, and hung up. She felt better for having taken some action. Arthur might not like it, she reflected, but he ought to realize

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how worried she'd be. In their whole married life he'd never been out this late before without her and, for that matter, very few times when they'd been out together.

At one-thirty Sergeant Bocca called her and asked, "Has your husband come home yet?"

"Oh no. I'd have called you right away if he had. You didn't find him?" As she spoke all Gertrude Trepp's vague, disseminated fears crystallized to form a hard lump in the pit of her stomach. "But—where can he be?"

"The cruiser officer drove over the whole route your husband would be expected to take and then over several other streets that would be more out of his way, but there was no sign of him. On Woodside Avenue all the houses were in darkness, the officer says. Maybe your husband went somewhere to have a cup of coffee with someone, Mrs. Trepp. People get to talking, you know, and don't realize how late it is."

Sergeant Bocca's tone was meant to convey reassurance. He didn't add that the cruiser officer, instructed to stop at the all-night diner that was the only eating place in Abbottsville open after one o'clock had just reported by radio that mailman Trepp wasn't there. Sergeant Bocca saw no need to tell Mrs. Trepp this and alarm her still more.

Sergeant Bocca went on to suggest to Mrs. Trepp that there was probably some perfectly good explanation for her husband's absence and that the best thing she could do would be to go to bed and try to get some rest while she waited for him.

Mrs. Trepp said she would and hung up.

"Damned if I can figure out where he is," Sergeant Bocca said to himself.

He was on the desk at police headquarters from midnight to eight. At six o'clock the phone rang and the sergeant, nodding in his chair, roused himself to answer it, making an effort to say, "Police Department, Sergeant Bocca," in a tone that would sound alert.

It was Mrs. Trepp calling, "Sergeant, my husband hasn't been home all night," she said, and burst into tears.

He tried to quiet her, pointing out that it would soon be daylight and then they'd be able to start making inquiries about her husband.

"That won't do any good," Mrs. Trepp sobbed. "Something dreadful's happened to him, I just know it has. He'd never stay out all night of his own free will. He's always been so regular in his habits, he's always——"

"He's due at the post office in another hour," Sergeant Bocca reminded her. "Even though something kept him away all night he may still report for work. I think

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the best thing to do is for you to call the post office at seven o'clock and find out if he's there. If he isn't, call me back and we'll see what we can do to find him."

Mrs. Trepp cried some more but agreed to do what the police officer suggested and at last hung up.

Sergeant Bocca sighed with relief when he got her off the phone. He was wide awake now, wondering what had become of Arthur Trepp.

At ten minutes past seven Mrs. Trepp called him again and said that her husband hadn't reported for work. This time she wasn't crying. She had thought over what she was going to say, had even rehearsed it to herself, and it came out without a break or hesitation. She said, "There were one or two things my husband told me before he left last night that I haven't mentioned up until now, Sergeant. I felt, you see, that if he was all right he wouldn't want me to say too much about his private affairs."

"Yes, Mrs. Trepp." The sergeant's tone held no accent of surprise. He was used to having people hold something back when they sought the aid of the police. "What did he say?"

"Well, at dinner I could see he was worried. I hadn't noticed it before because I went to a committee meeting at the church and got home so late I had to start dinner right away and I hardly talked to him at all. But at the table I noticed how he was acting. He ate next to nothing and he kept fidgeting around and looking at his watch and I could see he had something on his mind. I asked him what was the matter but he wouldn't say at first. He just said he had to go out, he had an appointment with someone. But he seemed so worried that I kept telling him I was his wife and had a right to know what was the matter and finally, just before he left the house, he said he had an appointment with a woman over on Woodside Avenue, that if I must know, she'd accused him of tampering with her mail and that was only part of it. He wouldn't tell me what the rest of it was. I got terribly upset, of course, but he wouldn't say any more. He wasn't supposed to say anything about it, he told me. He was hoping that maybe it would all be straightened out when he had a talk with the woman. 'We'll wait and see what happens tonight,' he said. 'Maybe the whole thing will blow over.'

"Then I asked him how long he'd be gone but he said he didn't know. I told him to get back as fast as he could, that I'd be on pins and needles waiting to hear how things went. He said he didn't want me to worry, he was sorry he'd mentioned it at all. Then he put on his coat and hat and

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walked out the front door and turned toward Latham Street. I shut the door after him and—and——" Mrs. Trepp's control began to slip, tears thickened her voice as she concluded, "That was the last I saw or heard of him."

"What time was it when he left the house, Mrs. Trepp?"

"It was five minutes of seven. He was watching the time. He took out his watch—he wears a pocket watch on a chain—and compared it with mine before he put on his overcoat."

The sergeant said, "I think I'd better take a run over to see you, Mrs. Trepp. Is it all right if I come now?"

"Yes indeed. The sooner the better."

Sergeant Bocca called the cruiser officer on the two-way radio and told him to return to headquarters and take over the desk. A few minutes later he was on his way to see Mrs. Trepp.

Her eyes were red with weeping when she came to the door, but she had got dressed and combed her hair and made coffee, which the sergeant accepted gratefully.

She had no additional information to give him, however, no idea who the woman on Woodside Avenue was, or what other accusation, besides tampering with the mail, she had made against Arthur Trepp. Nothing like this had ever happened to him before in all his years as a letter carrier, Mrs. Trepp stated. He had an excellent record at the post office, he'd always been regarded as very steady and reliable. They were very close, she said; he told her everything about his affairs.

Sergeant Bocca, being a husband himself, didn't believe this last statement, but he nodded as if in acceptance of it.

"Look at the way it went last night," Mrs. Trepp continued. "He couldn't help telling me a little bit about what was on his mind before he left, even though he wasn't supposed to say a word about it."

"In other words, the Woodside Avenue woman must have told him they'd keep it between themselves until they'd talked it over," the sergeant commented.

"Why yes, I suppose that was it."

Soon thereafter, having secured a detailed description of Arthur Trepp and what he was wearing when she last saw him, Sergeant Bocca departed, telling Mrs. Trepp as he looked out at the reddening sky, "Well, at least it's daylight now. I'll send the cruiser out to look for your husband and we'll start making inquiries on Woodside Avenue."

She followed him to the door. She was small and thin and her face looked haggard in the early light.

"You'll let me know the minute

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you find out the least little thing, won't you?" she asked anxiously.

"Oh yes. I'll be going off duty myself but Chief Schreiner will be in at eight and he'll do everything he can, Mrs. Trepp. He'll keep in close touch with you."

Sergeant Bocca drove back to headquarters. It was a few minutes before eight when he arrived, and just ahead of him he saw Chief Schreiner's car turn into the parking lot.

Schreiner, middle-aged, fleshy in build, with an untidy assortment of features, and eyes that had a watchful look under scanty eyebrows, waited for his subordinate at the front entrance. They went inside together to the chief's office. Another sergeant came on duty and took over the desk; patrolmen were reporting in or going off duty.

Bocca sat down with the police chief and gave him an account of Arthur Trepp's disappearance. The other man listened, asked questions at intervals, and reached for the telephone directory. He dialed the post office number and a moment later he was connected with the postmaster. The latter had already heard about Arthur Trepp and said yes, he'd be glad to talk to the police chief about him.

"I'll be over to see you in a little while," Schreiner said.

He hung up and for the next half hour Bocca and he were busy reporting the mailman missing to the state police and assigning regulars and supernumeraries to the search for him. Then Bocca, yawning and heavy-eyed and yet with a sense of leaving in the middle of the act, went home to bed and the police chief went to the post office.

Postmaster Buckley sat in thought for an interval after the Abbottsville police chief phoned him. Then he put in a call to Inspector Madden and told him about Trepp's disappearance.

"Perhaps I'd better see you about this, Mr. Buckley. What about this afternoon somewhere around two o'clock?"

"That would be fine," the postmaster replied. "Thank you very much, Inspector."

When Chief Schreiner arrived, he wanted to know first of all if there could be money involved in the alleged charge that Arthur Trepp had been tampering with someone's mail.

"No. Letter carriers have no occasion to handle post office money except for what comes in the registered mail or the odd sums that people put in letters without registering them."

The police chief, sitting in a chair beside the postmaster's desk, leaned forward to put out his cigarette in an ash tray. His gaze wandered around the office. There was linoleum on the floor, the

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walls were painted a serviceable buff color, the oak furniture had been around a long time. It seemed that the Post Office Department didn't throw public money around pampering its employees with luxurious furnishings. Schreiner's own office in the new police building was much nicer than this one.

He asked, "What kind of an employment record has Trepp got?"

"Very good," replied the postmaster.

"And suddenly he tells his wife he's been accused of tampering with someone's mail and disappears." Schreiner shook his head. "One way or another his disappearance is connected with his job."

This theory was not to the postmaster's liking, but he could produce no theory of his own that would account for Arthur Trepp's disappearance on other grounds, and therefore remained silent.

Schreiner inquired about Trepp's background before he became a letter carrier. Mr. Buckley, consulting the personnel files, informed him that the missing man had been born in Lacostia, New York, and had lived there all his life until he moved to Abbottsville. He had been employed as a clerk by a wholesale electric supply company in Lacostia. He was now fifty-nine years old.

"What made him move away from Lacostia when he'd lived there all his life?" the police chief inquired.

"Abbottsville is Mrs. Trepp's home town. After he met her he came here to live, passed his civil-service exam, and was appointed a substitute carrier in June 1939. He was made a regular carrier in August 1940 when a vacancy occurred, and he's done very well at his job ever since."

Schreiner made notes. Then he asked if he could question other post office employees.

"I guess so," Mr. Buckley said resignedly, and took him out to the workroom.

Jamieson, the superintendent of mails, and two of the clerks, Bill Howell and Roy Dutton, were in the workroom.

Addressing himself to the three of them, Schreiner asked, "Did any of you have any conversation with Mr. Trepp after he got back to the post office yesterday?"

"I was the only one that was here," Jamieson replied. "Bill is through for the day at two and Roy leaves at two-thirty. I was pretty busy, though, and I didn't get a chance to talk to Art."

"Well, has he said anything lately that would make you think he was having trouble on his route? Like being accused of tampering with someone's mail?"

"Good lord, no!" Jamieson exclaimed while Howell, lean and gray, and Roy Dutton, sandy-haired, young, and good-looking,

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eyed the police chief in astonishment.

"He never mentioned such a thing to me," Howell said a moment later.

"Nor to me," Dutton said.

That was the answer Schreiner got from all the post office employees who were available for questioning at that time. The letter carriers were out on their routes and he would have to see them later.

He had a sense of frustration as he went back to Mr. Buckley.

The postmaster hesitated, and then said, "Inspector Madden is coming out this afternoon to look into the affair."

"He is?" Schreiner gave this fact a moment's thought. "Ask him to stop by and see me after he leaves here, will you?"

"Yes, I'll do that."

The police chief thanked him and went back to police headquarters.

The search for Arthur Trepp followed routine lines. The bus terminal, the railroad station, and the town's one taxicab company were checked. The missing man, who was well known in Abbottsville, hadn't left by bus or train or taxi. The Abbottsville Trust Company would give out no information concerning his financial condition beyond stating that there had been no unusually large withdrawals recently from the checking or savings accounts that he carried jointly with his wife. No domestic discord was reported by the neighbors. They were unanimous in saying that the Trepps were a pleasant couple and seemed to get along well together.

It was noon before the first piece of information was turned in at headquarters by one of the patrolmen assigned to the search. He reported that in the house-to-house check on Woodside Avenue Mrs. Robert Walbridge's cleaning woman answered the door and said that Mrs. Walbridge wasn't home, she had gone to Dunston on a shopping trip. He then asked her if she herself could tell him anything about Arthur Trepp. She said she couldn't but perhaps Mrs. Walbridge could when she got home. Yesterday, the cleaning woman said, Mrs. Walbridge had put on a coat and gone outside when the mailman came and had talked to him for about five minutes or so. It was a cold morning and she'd closed the door after her; the cleaning woman had not heard anything that was said. Mrs. Walbridge, she went on to inform the officer, would probably be home by three or four o'clock that afternoon.

Except for this one statement no information about Arthur Trepp was secured from any of the residents of Woodside Avenue. None of them had seen him since he delivered the mail on that street yesterday morning, none of them had

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made an appointment with him for last night.

Schreiner reviewed to himself what he knew about Mrs. Robert Walbridge; he had no personal acquaintance with her. Her husband, an executive of a local industrial concern, had died nearly two years ago. Mrs. Walbridge—the city directory told him her first name was Alma—was a well-dressed, attractive woman who drew his attention whenever he saw her. She looked about thirty, he thought, which made her many years younger than her husband who had been in the neighborhood of fifty at the time of his death. Mrs. Walbridge had an excellent reputation and social standing in Abbottsville. She wasn't a native of the town; Walbridge had met and married her somewhere else. When he died he must have left her comfortably well off; the houses on Woodside Avenue ran into money, and Mrs. Walbridge seemed to have it. She drove a good car, she could afford to employ a cleaning woman, and according to the social notes in the paper she did a lot of entertaining and went away frequently on vacation trips. She was also active in civic affairs. She had no children.

What would a woman like her, Schreiner asked himself, have to say to her mailman that would keep her standing out on her doorstep for several minutes on a cold winter morning?

He would have to wait until three or four o'clock that afternoon for an answer to his question. In the meantime, the search for Arthur Trepp went on.

This was the situation when Inspector Madden arrived at the Abbottsville Post Office shortly after two o'clock.

He left his car in the parking lot behind the building and went in through the front door, a tall, sparely built man dressed in a dark suit and overcoat and wearing a gray felt hat.

He knocked on the postmaster's door and was told to come in.

"May I see Trepp's personnel file?" Madden asked after greeting the postmaster.

Mr. Buckley brought it out, Madden glanced through it without finding anything that held his attention and laid it on the desk. Arthur Trepp's work record was satisfactory; but what kind of a person was the man himself?

He put this question to the postmaster, who had only favorable comments to make on Arthur Trepp. He was a quiet, dependable man. There was nothing of the troublemaker in his character; there was nothing at all about him that would lead anyone to expect a thing like this.

"I can't begin to understand it," Mr. Buckley said to wind up his recital of Arthur Trepp's virtues. "Look what he told his wife about being accused of tampering with

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the mail. I can't make head or tail of it. Perhaps if you talked to her yourself, Inspector—? What do you think?"

Madden shook his head. "I don't believe it's necessary for me to intrude on her right now. After all, there's been no complaint of mail being tampered with, there's no evidence that it was. There's only Mrs. Trepp's statement of what her husband said to her. However, I guess I will have a word with some of the people here." He got to his feet and picked up his hat and coat, indicating to the postmaster that his business with him was concluded.

The latter went to the door that led to the finance department and said as he opened it for Madden, "I told the police chief you'd be out today and he asked if you would stop in and see him while you're here."

"Okay, I'll do that." Madden said good-by to Mr. Buckley and turned toward the rear of the building. One of the clerks on the windows had passed the word that the inspector was here; therefore, when he reached the workroom he found it a hive of activity with everyone in sight keeping very busy. He moved around the room asking much the same questions the police chief had asked and receiving much the same answers. After a few minutes of this he gave it up and left the post office.

CHAPTER THREE

This was the first time Madden had met the Abbottsville police chief. The latter shook hands, ushered him into his office, and at once began to unfold his problems. He hadn't been able to find Arthur Trepp or to uncover any clue to his present whereabouts. However, there was a woman on Woodside Avenue whom he was waiting to see; he hoped she might have some information for him.

He told the inspector what Mrs. Robert Walbridge's cleaning woman had said that morning. He hadn't yet been able to talk to Mrs. Walbridge herself since she had gone to Dunston on a shopping trip. Her cleaning woman must have left for the day because for the last hour no one had answered the phone.

The police chief then proceeded to tell Madden who Mrs. Walbridge was and what he knew about her. Finally he looked at his watch. It was ten minutes past four. "Think I'll try Mrs. Walbridge's number again."

He reached for the phone and dialed it. This time there was an answer. Mrs. Walbridge had come home. He told her who he was, that the police had been making inquiries on her street about someone they were trying to locate and hadn't found her home. He asked if he could see her now.

"Well, could we take care of it

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on the phone?" she asked. "I have to go out again a little later."

"I'd rather talk to you in person," Schreiner replied.

"All right, Mr. Schreiner," she said. "I'll expect you in a few minutes."

The police chief went on looking at Madden for a space and then asked. "Would you care to come along while I talk to Mrs. Walbridge, Inspector?"

Madden's interest in the case was growing. "Yes, I'd like to," he said. "Shall I follow you in my car?"

The wood that gave the street its name was on their right as they turned onto Woodside Avenue. A wood running in back of the houses on one side of the street—Madden thought suddenly of what this conveyed to him. Then he wondered if the thought was so sudden after all or if it hadn't been somewhere far back in his mind ever since Mr. Buckley phoned him this morning.

Mrs. Walbridge's house, set well back from the road, was painted barn red and had a two-car garage attached to it by a breezeway. The white trim had been painted recently, the house and the grounds looked as if much thought and care had been given to them.

"Very nice," Madden commented as they went up the flagstone walk to the front door.

"Cost plenty of dough," Schreiner said absently.

Mrs. Walbridge answered the door. "Come in, Mr. Schreiner. I—" She broke off abruptly as her glance went past him to David Madden. He looked back at her without surprise. She was the tall, redheaded woman who had called herself Mrs. Sampson when she came to his office. She said in a subdued voice, "Come in. . . ."

The police chief eyed her speculatively as he said, "This is Inspector Madden of the Postal Inspection Service, Mrs. Walbridge. But perhaps you've met him before?"

She looked straight at Madden and shook her head. "No, we haven't met. How do you do, Inspector."

"How do you do, Mrs. Walbridge," he replied.

She shut the front door and turned toward the living room that ran the full length of the house. "Won't you come and sit down?" she said.

They followed her into the living room, and when they were seated she said, "I understand our mailman is missing, Mr. Schreiner. Right after you called me, my next-door neighbor, who'd seen me come home, called to tell me the police were looking for him on our street."

"Did you see Mr. Trepp last night?" the police chief asked.

"No, I didn't. My neighbor said he was supposed to have had an appointment with someone on Woodside Avenue but it wasn't

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with me." Her words were for the police chief but she couldn't keep her glance from straying to Madden, who fancied he caught a challenging spark in it. Mrs. Walbridge opened a box of cigarettes on the table beside her and leaned forward to offer them to David Madden who was sitting near her. He took one but Schreiner said no, he didn't smoke.

The inspector stood up to light Mrs. Walbridge's cigarette. His expression was inscrutable as their eyes met over his lighter. He lit her cigarette, then his own, and went back to his chair.

Schreiner, in the conversational tone he had been employing all along, asked, "Do you know of anyone on Woodside Avenue who might have had an appointment with Mr. Trepp last night, Mrs. Walbridge?"

"No, I don't."

"You didn't happen to see him in this neighborhood?"

"No."

"According to his wife, he had an appointment with a woman on Woodside Avenue and left to keep it around seven o'clock."

"Well, as I told you, it wasn't with me, Mr. Schreiner. As a matter of fact I had some friends here for bridge last night."

"Did you? What time was that? I'd like to ask them if they saw Mr. Trepp."

"But they didn't arrive at my house until about eight."

"Still, I'd better check with them. May I have their names?"

Mrs. Walbridge supplied the names of the three women who had been her guests, and the police chief wrote them down. Then, crossing his legs and adjusting the crease in his trousers, he resumed. "I was kind of hoping Mr. Trepp said something to you yesterday morning about this appointment he had."

"Yesterday morning?"

The inspector, studying her with an interest not altogether professional, thought he detected a guarded note in her voice.

"Your cleaning woman told the officer who inquired at your house earlier today that you went outside to talk to Mr. Trepp when he delivered your mail yesterday."

"Oh . . . yes . . ." Alma Walbridge inhaled deeply on her cigarette and blew out the smoke she had inhaled before she said, "Yes, I did talk to Mr. Trepp yesterday. But it had nothing to do with what you're asking about. It was just—well, it was a small matter."

"Yes, Mrs. Walbridge?" Schreiner waited.

Again she used her cigarette to delay her reply, and the color that rushed to her face betrayed her confusion. At last she said, "I talked to Mr. Trepp about a package I mailed before Christmas that didn't reach its destination."

"Was the package insured, Mrs. Walbridge?"

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"Well, no, it wasn't."

The police chief shook his head and glanced at Madden. "Not a good idea to mail packages that way during the Christmas rush, is it, Inspector?"

"It's safer to insure them," Madden agreed.

"I hope there was nothing too valuable in the package," the police chief went on in a commiserating tone of voice.

"No. It wasn't a Christmas gift. It was a slip I bought for myself a while ago that was too short for me. I sent it to my sister to see if my niece could wear it. I mailed it over a week ago but my sister wrote the day before yesterday that it hadn't arrived yet." Mrs. Walbridge offered this explanation hurriedly.

The police chief went on. "What is your sister's name and address?"

After a pause she replied, "Mrs. Muriel Hall, 288 Grove Street, Lacostia, New York."

"Well, that's a coincidence," Schreider remarked without emphasis. "Lacostia was Mr. Trepp's home town. Did you know that, Mrs. Walbridge?"

"He mentioned it one day when he brought me a letter from my sister."

"Did you ever live there yourself?"

"Yes."

"Did you know him in Lacostia?"

"No, I didn't." She looked straight at the police chief as she said this, and there was no evasiveness in her tone or manner.

"Did Mr. Trepp seem to think your package would be found?"

Alma Walbridge said crisply, "The package is of no consequence Mr. Schreiner. It has nothing to do with Mr. Trepp's disappearance. I just happened to talk to him about it yesterday and he told me I should file a complaint at the post office. They'd look for it, he said, but he didn't think they'd be apt to find it, and since it wasn't insured there wasn't much that could be done about it." Her glance sought Madden's. "That's right, isn't it?"

"Yes. An uninsured parcel-post package lost during the Christmas rush isn't very likely to be recovered, Mrs. Walbridge."

She nodded and gave him a brief smile of approval as if what he said put the stamp of truth on her story.

"So," she resumed, "that's what Mr. Trepp and I talked about and then we chatted about Christmas for a bit and he went on to the next house with the mail and that was the last time I saw him, Mr. Schreiner." She looked at her watch. "I'm sorry, but I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to excuse me now. I'm due at an eggnog party at five and I'll have to change first." She stood up in dismissal.

"Have you taken Mr. Trepp's advice and gone to the post office

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to see about your package?" Schreiner inquired as he followed Mrs. Walbridge's example and got to his feet.

"Why——" She looked taken aback. "No, I haven't got around to it yet."

"You should," he said. "You shouldn't let it go another day, Mrs. Walbridge." The police chief's tone was as serious as if he'd believed every word she had said to him.

She made no reply. Madden, getting into his overcoat, told himself that she had, of course, talked to Trepp about being blackmailed, had accused him, apparently, of being the blackmailer. There must have been some sort of showdown between them last night that had led to Trepp's removing himself from Abbottsville as fast as he could."

The inspector said good-by to Alma Walbridge, followed the police chief down the steps, and fell in beside him on the front walk.

"What a pack of lies she told me," Schreiner exclaimed as soon as the front door was safely closed behind them. "That package never existed. She knew Trepp in Lacostia, whatever they talked about is the reason he's disappeared."

"It looks that way," Madden said.

"It sure does," Schreiner said. "Why else would she lie like that?"

"I can't think of any other reason for it," Madden said.

"But what can I do about it?" Schreiner demanded aggrievedly, coming to a halt beside his car. "I can't call her a liar to her face, not unless I got proof she is. If I can't get it—oh well, it's my worry, not yours." He opened the car door. "Drop in and see me again when you're in Abbottsville."

"Thanks, I will." Madden went on to his car.

At the corner of Woodside Avenue with a farewell beep of his horn the police chief turned left toward the center of Abbottsville and Madden turned right toward Dunston.

The latter's thoughts were on Alma Walbridge and what had taken place between her and Trepp. He hadn't considered it necessary to tell the police chief that he had a very good idea of what lay behind her conversation with the letter carrier and the latter's subsequent disappearance. For the present at least, he would continue to treat her visit to his office as a confidential matter.

During her visit she had said she didn't know who was blackmailing her. But that was three weeks ago. With the third demand for money hanging over her a number of things could have happened. She could have found out that Trepp was her blackmailer. If he was, it indicated that whatever he knew about her lay in the past when they were both living in Lacostia, New York.

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Yesterday, Madden's thoughts continued, she must have confronted Trepp with proof of one kind or another that he was her blackmailer; apparently it was was something connected with her mail, since it seemed she had accused him of tampering with it. Last night there had been a showdown between them, sometime between seven o'clock when he left home and eight o'clock when her bridge party began.

The inspector paused in his reconstruction of these events. There hadn't been as much time allotted to the showdown as he would have expected. But it was possible that Alma Walbridge's proof of Trepp's blackmailing activities had been strong enough to overwhelm the man; also, it could have been reinforced with the threat that she would take it to Madden.

However the situation had developed, Trepp had not only been frightened off, he had been driven into immediate, unplanned flight.

During the remainder of the drive to Dunston the inspector went back over the conclusions he had reached testing them for flaws. He didn't like the scanty amount of time he was allowing for the showdown between Alma and Trepp; and to get the letter carrier out of Abbottsville he had to place him in a highway dependent on thumbing a ride, since Schreiner had said he hadn't left by train or bus or taxi.

These were the flaws Madden found; he would keep them in mind.

He went to his office, worked at his desk for an hour and at six o'clock was ready to declare his working day ended. Then he went home to the apartment in which he had lived alone since the death of his wife four years ago.

CHAPTER FOUR

That evening the police chief went to see Mrs. Trepp. She was no longer alone; a cousin, a woman near her own age, had arrived to stay with her while she waited for news of her husband.

Mrs. Trepp had no hope that he was alive. "He can't be," she told the police chief. "He's been killed. I know it."

Schreiner said, "But, Mrs. Trepp, you told us he said he hoped the whole thing might blow over. That doesn't sound as if it was something that would lead to murder."

"I don't care how it sounds, I know it did lead to murder, I know Arthur's dead." Mrs. Trepp began to cry, asserting brokenly that there was nothing in her husband's life that would cause him to vanish of his own free will.

By the time he left her, Schreiner knew he had become infected by Mrs. Trepp's belief that her husband had been murdered. He couldn't dismiss it from his mind.

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It tallied with too many of the facts. The mailman wasn't given to unexpected or erratic behavior, he seemed content with his job and his home life. Last night he'd had an appointment with a woman on Woodside Avenue who'd accused him of tampering with her mail, and he hadn't been seen since. It was after all the kind of appointment that could take an ugly turn, that could lead to quarreling and then to violence.

The police chief's thoughts went to Alma Walbridge, who lived on Woodside Avenue, who was the only person on the street known to have been in conversation with the mailman yesterday, who had lied about the subject of the conversation, and who came from the same town as Trepp. On such slight grounds perhaps it was a little early to ask the police in Lacostia, New York, to look for some link between the two, but he would do it soon, the police chief told himself. He would do it in another two or three days if Trepp wasn't found or some lead pointing away from Woodside Avenue uncovered.

But they found him the next day late in the afternoon when the December dusk was already falling. They found him, a state police officer and three members of the local police force, while they were searching the wood back of Woodside Avenue. He lay face down at the bottom of a pit that had been dug long ago by boys at play and was now nearly filled in again with sand and debris and dead matted leaves.

Leaves had been piled on his body to conceal it. His hat lay beside him; a black crust of blood had formed on the back of his head where the bones had been crushed by some heavy weapon. The nature of the wounds made it obvious to the officers who gathered around the pit waiting for the medical examiner, the police chief, and the state-police technicians to arrive that Arthur Trepp had been murdered.

Murder was an uncommon thing in Abbottsville. The local officers were shaken by it; they had nothing to say as they watched the state police officer make a sketch of the scene. They were still standing in silence at the edge of the pit when Schreiner and the medical examiner appeared, having parked their cars on the dirt road that ran parallel to Woodside Avenue through the wood.

After a brief examination the medical examiner told them what they already knew, that the blows on the back of Trepp's head had been sufficient in themselves to cause death.

It was dark by the time the state police technicians arrived. They set up spotlights and roped off a large area around Arthur Trepp's body and all the way back to the dirt road. This area would be

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searched exhaustively for clues and for the murder weapon which was not found in the pit or anywhere in the immediate vicinity of the body.

The medical examiner left to phone the coroner and the pathologist at Dunston Hospital who would perform the autopsy. Presently a hearse came out from Dunston to take the dead man away. Men were assigned to the search of the roped-off area, there was nothing more for the police chief to do there in the wood. His next task was to go to Mrs. Trepp and tell her she had been right in saying her husband was murdered.

The interlude with her was not as harrowing as the police chief had expected it to be. He was only confirming her worst fears, and when the first moments of shock and horror were over Mrs. Trepp, through her tears, urged him to keep looking for the woman on Woodside Avenue whom her husband had gone to see. "She knows all about it, she knows what happened to my poor Arthur," Mrs. Trepp sobbed. "He went to her house. He was killed after he got there."

"If he got that far," Schreiner said. "His watch is broken, the hands stopped at twenty minutes past seven. The chain is snapped in two. Did you happen to notice if it was in good condition when he left the house?"

"Yes, it was. He took it out and looked at it to check the time. He wouldn't have broken it. It was his father's watch and he was always careful with it. Was the gold piece still on the chain?"

"Gold piece? No. What was it?"

"He called it his good-luck charm." Mrs. Trepp's tears flowed faster. "But it—it brought him no luck the other night. Oh, my poor, poor Arthur."

Schreiner brought out his notebook and waited until she quieted a little. Then he asked, "Will you describe the gold piece for me, Mrs. Trepp?"

"It came to Arthur with the watch when his father died. It was a two-dollar-and-a-half gold piece, and as I understood it his father had it from the time he was a young man. It had a Liberty head on it and it was coined in 1866. It was worth a lot of money, Arthur always said, two or three hundred dollars. But he'd never part with it. It meant a lot to him. And now it's gone and he's gone—my poor husband—"

Mrs. Trepp broke down completely. Her cousin came in to try to comfort her and very soon thereafter Schreiner left and went on to headquarters.

It was nearly seven o'clock. He'd had no dinner. He phoned his wife that he wouldn't be home, sent out for sandwiches and coffee, and then called up the postmaster at his house. The postmaster was shocked by the news of Trepp's

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murder, but he had nothing to add to what he had told Schreiner yesterday morning.

Schreiner said, "Still, I'll have to talk to everyone at the post office again, Mr. Buckley. Will eight o'clock tomorrow morning suit you?"

"Come whenever you like," the postmaster told him. "We'll give you all the co-operation we can."

Schreiner's next move was to send out a teletype to the Lacostia, New York, police, asking for information on Arthur Trepp and Alma Walbridge, stressing his interest in establishing a link between them in the past.

Sergeant Bocca came on duty early. The police chief left him in charge of the investigation and went to see Alma Walbridge.

It was then nine o'clock, and when he arrived her house, silhouetted against the lights in the wood, seemed to be in darkness. But walking around to the side of the house, Schreiner saw a light burning upstairs and went to the front door and rang the bell. After an interval a light was turned on in the hall and she called out, "Who's there?"

"Police Chief Schreiner," he replied. "I'm sorry if I got you out of bed, Mrs. Walbridge, but something's come up that I need to talk to you about."

"Oh." After a moment's delay he heard the catch on the lock being turned. She said, "Let yourself in, Mr. Schreiner, while I go upstairs and get dressed."

He gave her time to climb the stairs before he opened the door and then stood in the hall listening to her moving back and forth over his head. She came down a minute or so later wearing slacks and a wool blouse. Her hair had been brushed back hastily, and she had no make-up on.

Her gray eyes studied him. "It's about Mr. Trepp, isn't it? I saw men searching the woods today, and tonight I heard his body was found. The police are still out there, aren't they? I saw their lights from my bedroom window."

"They're looking for clues, Mrs. Walbridge. Including the murder weapon."

"Oh." Alma preceded the police chief into the living room and switched on lamps. "Sit down."

Schreiner seated himself facing her. She asked, "How was he killed?"

"His skull was fractured. He was hit over the head several times with some heavy instrument."

Her face whitened. "How dreadful!"

"Yes."

"Where did you find him?"

"In a pit some boys must have dug. It's just a little below your house about a hundred feet in from the edge of the woods."

Alma shuddered. "Do you think he'd been there since the night he disappeared?"

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"Yes." Schreiner's untidy features—bulbous nose, crooked mouth, double chin—were set in a grim expression. "I think he was murdered and his body hidden in the woods soon after he left his house the other night, the night he had the appointment with a woman on Woodside Avenue."

She threw back her head and eyed him steadily. "His appointment was not with me, Mr. Schreiner. I've already told you that."

"I didn't say it was. But I will say I'm not satisfied that it was a package you were talking to him about the other day. Now that we know this is a murder case, Mrs. Walbridge, I came here to ask you again what took you outside to talk to Mr. Trepp the day he was killed."

Alma went on looking at him. She said, "I talked to him about the package. I had nothing else to talk to him about. I didn't even know him except as my mailman."

"You both came from the same town."

"But I never knew him at all when I lived there." She made this statement in a quick, earnest voice. "I didn't know he came from there until one day when he gave me a letter from my sister he glanced at the postmark and said something to the effect that here was a letter from his old home town, and then we talked a little about Lacostia. But he'd lived on the other side of the town and it has a population of nearly twenty thousand; it wasn't surprising that we'd never known each other there. Then, too, he'd moved to Abbottsville nearly four years before I left Lacostia and went to New York. That's where I met my husband. I came to live in Abbottsville after we were married but I never met Mr. Trepp, I never heard of him until he started delivering mail on this route two or three years ago."

"I see." Schreiner regarded her contemplatively. "That talk you had the other day, Mrs. Walbridge—according to your cleaning woman, you were watching for Mr. Trepp, you put on a coat and went outside on a cold winter morning and stood talking on the doorstep with him for a good five minutes or more. If it was just about a missing package of no great value you could have called the post office, or if you preferred to talk to him about it you could have asked him to step in the hall where it was warm. It's my impression that whatever you wanted to say to him you didn't want the cleaning woman to hear you."

"No, that wasn't it at all." She made firm reply. "I didn't care in the least if Mrs. Charland heard our conversation. I went outside because—well, it was one of those things you do without much thought. I happened to see Mr. Trepp coming up the street, my coat was there in the hall closet, I just threw it on and went out to

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ask him what I should do about the package."

Schreiner permitted himself an exasperated sigh. Mrs. Walbridge wasn't going to give an inch, he recognized. She would stick to that story forever—unless he could get hold of proof that she was lying and pry her loose from it.

He inquired, "Have you talked to your sister on the phone since I saw you yesterday?"

Her glance flickered away from him. She was slow to answer, weighing, he thought, what she should say and realizing that long-distance calls could be checked on. "Yes, I have," she said finally. "I called her yesterday after you left. Just to ask her if she'd got over all the Christmas excitement yet."

When the police chief made no comment Alma added with a trace of defiance in her voice, "I call her quite often, two or three times a month, or else she calls me. We're very close to each other. She's a widow, too, there's only the two of us and Susan, her daughter."

"Did you mention the package to your sister yesterday?"

"I asked her if she'd received it yet. She said no."

Schreiner continued to regard her contemplatively, her upthrust head, tightly clasped hands, still, colorless face, guarded eyes. A woman like her, he thought, a woman of means and social standing and good reputation might very well have got as mad as a hornet by this time over the questions he was asking her. You'd almost expect her to order him out of the house if her conscience was clear, if she had nothing to conceal. Alma Walbridge wasn't in that position. Her conscience wasn't clear, she had plenty to conceal, she was scared stiff. She didn't dare get mad or do anything except sit there and answer every question he put to her.

He moved on to the bridge game that had been played at her house the night of Trepp's disappearance. It had lasted, she said, from about eight o'clock until shortly before midnight.

A few minutes later Mr. Schreiner said good night and left. When he was gone Alma stood at a window looking out at the lights in the wood that told her the search for the murder weapon and other clues still went on. She was every bit as frightened as the police chief had thought.

Over breakfast next morning Inspector Madden was jarred by the story of Trepp's murder in the Dunston *Post*. Instantly his thoughts went to the conclusions he had reached two days ago about Trepp and Alma Walbridge when the former was a missing person, not a murder victim. They were no longer valid. Now he had to ask himself if Alma had killed the letter carrier.

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With his mind's eye he looked at her. She had seemed vulnerable, sensitive, self-controlled to him even though he had met her as the harassed prey of a blackmailer who, in all likelihood, had been Trepp.

But no matter what the provocation, would she have killed him? Was she morally capable of such an act?"

This question filled the inspector's mind as he went to his office. He would not try to answer it, not yet.

Soon after he settled himself at his desk he received a phone call from the Abbottsville postmaster who asked, "Have you read about Trepp's murder, Inspector?"

"Yes. Are there any developments beyond what's in the paper?"

"The police chief is here now questioning all of us. He's out in the workroom at the moment so I thought I'd call you. He thinks that Trepp's murder is tied in with his job, that there's nothing else in his life that would lead to it."

Madden, the phone in one hand, a pen in the other, drew diagrams on a pad and said, "All you can do is give him your full co-operation, Mr. Buckley."

"I don't like to think, though, that it might be tied in with the post office in some way." The anxiety Mr. Buckley felt was revealed in his voice.

"You don't know that it is. The police chief is looking around for a lead right now, and that means you people are bound to be investigated. Don't worry about it too much. Let him do the worrying."

"Well, if that's how you feel about it——" The postmaster spoke on a note of relief.

"I do feel that way about it, Mr. Buckley, and I want you to feel the same. If anything else comes up you think I should know just get in touch with me."

The postmaster thanked him and said good-by. Madden, who meant to spend the day at his desk catching up on the reports that were always waiting for his attention, found it difficult to concentrate on the maintenance of post office buildings. His thoughts kept straying to the murder in Abbottsville. He thought about Arthur Trepp, in appearance and personality so unremarkable that Madden could summon up only the haziest recollection of him. He thought about Schreiner, unprepossessing to look at, plodding in manner, but with more ability than showed at first glance. Most of all he thought about Alma, her distinctive hair, lovely speaking voice, well-bred behavior, and involvement, one way or another, in a murder case.

Late in the afternoon his phone rang. It was Alma Walbridge calling him. The moment she said, "Inspector Madden?" he recognized her voice.

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"Speaking," he said.

"This is Alma Walbridge. I wonder if I could see you today?" She paused. "I suppose you know about Mr. Trepp?"

"Yes, I saw it in the paper."

"Well, I'd like very much to talk to you. Will you be at your office much longer? I realize," she went on hastily, "that it is an imposition on New Year's Eve when you probably plan to get away early, but I'd try not to take up much of your time."

The inspector's narrow, dark eyebrows arched in surprise as he listened. He glanced at his desk clock. He was invited to a dinner party that night but he wasn't due there until eight o'clock. He said, "I'm going to leave here very shortly, Mrs. Walbridge. Why don't I drive out and see you?"

"Oh, that's very nice of you," she replied with warm gratitude.

"Not at all. Shall we say half an hour from now"?

"Yes, that will be fine. Thank you so much."

The inspector hung up, shaking his head in thought. He hadn't expected to hear from Alma Walbridge. Her attitude, when he went to see her with Schreiner, had implied that their previous meeting, their discussion of the blackmail letters she was receiving, had never taken place.

She had coffee ready when he arrived at her house. She brought it in on a tray and offered thin slices of Christmas fruitcake with it. She wore silver costume jewelry with a plain black wool dress. Her face lacked color under its crown of red hair and her eyes showed strain, but she talked graciously of nothing while she poured coffee.

It was four-thirty. Dusk had begun to invade the corners of the large living room, but in front of the wood fire that burned on the hearth there was brightness and warmth, a sense of the occasion being purely social. Madden drank his coffee, his manner circumspect. Alma Walbridge had asked him to come, it was up to her to state her reason for it. She wanted a favor from him, he decided; the setting of open fire and coffee was designed to establish a friendly atmosphere in which to ask it. The favor she wanted was that he make no mention to the police chief of her visit to his office. He would have to make it clear to her that, whatever action he took ultimately, no question of special consideration for her could be allowed to enter into it.

She broke in on her own small talk to say suddenly, "Inspector, I know no more about Mr. Trepp's murder than you do. I had no appointment with him the night it took place, I didn't see him after he delivered mail at my house that morning."

Madden made a gesture of protest and then smiled to soften its

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effect as he said, "There's no reason for you to tell me that, Mrs. Walbridge. It's a police matter and the only way I would come into it would be if some violation of postal regulations by Mr. Trepp was uncovered. Even then, with the man dead, there'd be little I could do except send in a report on it."

Alma said, "I've already told Mr. Schreiner what I've just told you but I'm not at all sure he believed me. . . . Will you have more coffee?"

"Please." Madden brought his empty cup to her without offering a comment on what she had said.

She filled his cup and poured another cup for herself. Then she asked, "Isn't there some way that you work with the police on this, Mr. Madden? Won't they at least consult you where the post office is concerned?"

"Not necessarily. Not unless something comes up that I should look into."

"Then you haven't—you and Mr. Schreiner—" She stopped short and took refuge in drinking coffee. But over the rim of the cup she looked at him with intense anxiety.

He could relieve it a little. He said, "I haven't seen or heard from Mr. Schreiner since I came here with him the other day. There's no reason why I should. If, however, he gets in touch with me and asks if you made a complaint about Trepp I would feel that he was entitled to know about your visit to my office. But I see no reason, as matters now stand, to volunteer the information. When people go to a postal inspector, Mrs. Walbridge, with a problem such as you brought to me, it's our policy, as far as possible, to treat the matter as confidential."

He could hear the quick sigh of relief she gave. "Thank you," she said. "I've been worrying about the way Mr. Schreiner would interpret my visit to you. He'd say that what I went to see you about led to Mr. Trepp's murder. It didn't, though. On the surface it looks as if the two things are connected but they're not. Something else in Mr. Trepp's life was the cause of his murder."

Madden finished his coffee before he inquired, "Couldn't there be a connection that you're not aware of, Mrs. Walbridge?"

"I'm quite sure there isn't," she replied. "Because I'm the one who's been blackmailed, and if Mr. Trepp was the blackmailer the connection would be that I murdered him to put a stop to what he was doing to me. But I didn't murder him, so there is no connection." She hesitated and then added, "As a matter of fact, I haven't said he was the blackmailer. I said *if* he was."

Madden wanted to ask, "Well, wasn't he?" but knew the question was a leading one that he had bet-

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ter leave unasked. While he was considering what comment he should make the doorbell rang.

Alma said "Excuse me," and hurried to answer it. A moment later when she opened the door he heard her exclaim, "Muriel! Susan! What a surprise! Come in."

He thought he caught a thread of dismay running through Alma's voice. Her unexpected visitors weren't altogether welcome, it seemed. Then they were both talking at once explaining their visit, one of them speaking on a young, gay note, the other more restrained. "Mother said we're going to Aunt Alma's over New Year's and I said we should at least call you first and what about Marcia Blake's party that I was supposed to go to, what am I going to do about that? But Mother insisted we should come——"

"I know I should have called, Alma, to ask if you had any plans we'd interfere with, but instead I told Susan we'd just get in the car and come, because that's what I felt like doing; but if you——"

"I told Mother it was plain crazy——"

Alma assured them it wasn't crazy, she was simply delighted to see them. Take off their things, she said. Susan could carry the suitcases upstairs, Muriel must come in and sit down and not worry about her plans for tonight. She was only going to an open-house party the Nesbitts were giving, Muriel knew them and could come with her; they'd think of something else for Susan to do with some of the young people.

While they talked Madden heard the closet door open and close as coats were hung up and footsteps on the stairs, Susan carrying up the suitcases. Then Alma and a woman whom he inferred was Muriel entered the living room and he got to his feet.

"Mr. Madden," Alma said. "My sister, Mrs. Hall."

Mrs. Hall looked many years older than Alma. Dark-eyed, dark-haired, and plump, she bore just a trace of family resemblance to her redheaded sister.

Madden and she said how do you do to each other, Susan called down from upstairs, "Mother, you said you were cold. Shall I get your sweater out of the suitcase?"

"I won't need it now, thank you. There's a lovely fire down here."

"Don't bother unpacking now," Alma called up to the girl. "Come and have some coffee. . . . Sit down, Muriel. Let me draw a chair closer to the fire for you."

Madden forestalled her in pulling an armchair forward, close to the hearth. Mrs. Hall sat down; Alma said, "I'll get two more cups. Isn't it lucky I made such a big pot of coffee?" and vanished.

Mrs. Hall leaned back in the chair and remarked to Madden, "I'm so glad to get here. It's been a long, cold drive."

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"Yes, I should think it would be," Madden said.

Alma reappeared with cups and saucers, cake plates, and napkins. As she seated herself at the low table where the coffee had been kept hot over a candle warmer, Susan came downstairs and entered the room.

"Well, dear," Alma said, her voice and her eyes soft with affection for the girl. "This is Mr. Madden. My niece, Susan Hall."

Susan gave the inspector a quick, shy smile and a speculative glance as she said, "How do you do," and moved past him to drop down on a footstool near Alma.

She resembled the latter, Madden thought. The same transparently fair skin, the same height and slimness, darker red, almost bronze-colored hair. She would resemble her aunt even more in a few years, he thought, when she lost the gangling, unfinished look of the adolescent that she still had and acquired something of her aunt's graceful elegance.

A moment later his glance went to Mrs. Hall who was looking at her sister with unconcealed anxiety, who had made this sudden trip to Abbottsville because she knew her sister was involved somehow in Trepp's murder.

Alma, pouring coffee, asked Susan to bring her Madden's cup.

"No more, thank you," he said. "I must get back to Dunston."

"Oh, must you?" Alma's tone expressed polite regret. As he got to his feet she stood up, too, saying, "Let me see, your coat——"

"It's right here." He picked it up from a chair in the corner, slid his arms into the sleeves, and picked up his hat. He said good-by to Mrs Hall and Susan and told them it was very nice to have met them.

They echoed this civility and Alma walked to the front door with him. He might have been any guest, she any hostess, except for the farewells they exchanged. Alma said, "Good-by, Mr. Madden. Thank you for coming." He said, "You're quite welcome. Goodby, Mrs. Walbridge," and that was all.

CHAPTER FIVE

New Year's morning Alma was the first person up in the house. She hadn't gone to bed until two—Tony Chamberlin, perennial bachelor, had taken Muriel and her to the Nesbitts' open house after she'd made arrangements for Susan to attend a teen-age party—but Alma hadn't been able to forget her troubles and enjoy herself nor to sleep very well after she got home.

At eight o'clock she was downstairs bringing in the morning paper. There was nothing new in it about Arthur Trepp, just a short item that said the police were still looking for the murder weapon and that the funeral would take place tomorrow.

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She fixed a tray with orange juice, toasted muffins, and coffee and took it to the living room with the newspaper. She was on her second cup of coffee and second cigarette when Muriel came downstairs.

It was the first time they'd been alone together since Muriel's arrival yesterday. When she brought in her tray and sat down with it Alma said, "I suppose Susan will sleep until noon after her late night."

"Oh yes." Muriel smiled. "Things have changed. Remember how early she'd have us out of bed when she was a little girl?"

"Indeed I do. When she came to visit us I used to find myself up at six o'clock." Alma's reminiscent smile died quickly. "What did you say to her about the murder?"

"Nothing really. It was in the *Journal* yesterday morning. You know, former Lacostia resident murdered in Abbottsville. Susan saw it first and called my attention to it. I was stunned but I didn't let her see it. Then I started worrying about how it would affect your position, and I felt I just had to come and see you; but the way I put it to Susan she didn't realize why I insisted on coming. I kept thinking—" Muriel lowered her voice "—what if the police should find out that he——"

"They won't," Alma said swiftly. "They just won't, that's all."

"But suppose he let someone else know he was blackmailing you and that person should tell the police about it?"

"I'm sure he didn't. After all, blackmail is a criminal offense. Why tell anyone you're engaged in it?"

"Even so, it seems—Oh, Alma, I'm so frightened for you."

Alma's eyes appraised her sister defensively. "Are you by any chance just a little bit afraid that I'm the one who killed him?"

"Of course not!" Muriel protested. "How could I think such a thing of you? But it's not what I think, it's what the police will think if they find out what that man was doing to you."

"Well, they haven't found out yet." Alma stood up, her anxious thoughts impelling movement. She carried her tray to the kitchen, came back, and halted in front of a window. Looking out at the winter morning she told her sister who Madden was and about her conversation with him yesterday. Then, turning to look at her sister, she said, "It's so comforting that you came to lend moral support, Muriel, but I almost wish you hadn't, because it makes me feel more uneasy than ever to have Susan brought on the scene. You must take her home tomorrow. You'd have to anyway, wouldn't you? Christmas vacation is over, school starts Tuesday."

"Yes, but——"

Alma went to her sister and

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rested her hand on her shoulder. "It means so much that you came wanting to help me," she said gently. "You've always been there when I needed you, Muriel."

"Well, why not? I'm so much older than you——"

"I know. But I don't believe there are many older sisters like you. In this situation, though, there's really nothing you can do for me. I just have to wait and hope for the best, and you must take Susan home tomorrow." She bent and kissed her sister on the cheek. "Bless you, though, for coming."

"Oh, Alma." There were tears in Muriel's eyes as she looked up at the younger woman. "Alma . . ."

The latter's voice took on a brisk note. "I'm going upstairs and take a shower and get dressed. Why don't you come up with me and crawl back in bed for a little nap? You look tired, Muriel. You had that long drive yesterday, and neither of us got enough sleep last night. We'll plan to take it easy today."

"All right." Muriel smiled through her tears, stood up, and followed her sister upstairs.

Alma showered and went downstairs. She washed the breakfast dishes and had just finished tidying the living room when the doorbell rang, sending a pang of fear through her as it kept doing these days.

This time her fear was justified. She found the police chief on the doorstep. He wasn't in uniform, she was thankful for that, and he smiled and said good morning as if he were making a social call on her.

"Good morning, Mr. Schreiner," she replied. "Won't you come in?"

"Thank you." He followed her into the living room and sat down with her. Susan was uppermost in Alma's thoughts. If the girl woke up and came downstairs she would try to pass off the police chief's visit as a friendly New Year's call, just as yesterday she had let Susan assume that Madden was an admirer of hers.

But Susan, she thought next, restraining an impulse to nervous laughter, would be entitled to wonder at this sudden influx of masculine company.

Schreiner took his time in voicing the purpose of his visit. He talked about the holiday, the extra police on duty last night, Abbottsville's good fortune in having no traffic accidents occur. At last he said, "There are still men out back in the woods looking for the murder weapon, Mrs. Walbridge. It was something heavy and blunt, according to the preliminary autopsy findings. I've been thinking about your garage, how handy it would be for the murderer to pick up a weapon out there. The breezeway separates it from the house, you don't keep it locked, anyone could go in without you

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knowing it. I wonder if you'd mind taking a look around it with me to see if anything's missing?"

He sat looking at her with the same affability he'd been displaying ever since his arrival. She couldn't refuse his request, she told herself, no matter what was behind it. She must co-operate with him, act as if she had nothing to hide. She said, "Certainly, Mr. Schreiner," and stood up. Her legs felt shaky but he couldn't know that. She went to the hall closet for a sweater and put it on. "We'd better go out through the kitchen." She led the way, opening the back door, crossing the breezeway, opening the opposite door that brought them into the garage.

"Lots of room here," Schreiner said, looking around.

He moved straight to her husband's workbench. His tool chest still stood on it, closed but not locked. Schreiner opened the lid and shook his head at her reprovingly. "This is too nice a set of tools to be left out here where someone could steal them. I should think you'd at least keep the chest locked."

"I don't know where the key is. It must be around somewhere but I don't think I've seen it since my husband's death."

"Well, let's see what's here . . . screw drivers, wrenches, claw hammer, ball-peen hammer—your husband have any other hammers, Mrs. Walbridge?"

"Not that I recall. I took a smaller, lighter one in the house, and a couple of screw drivers and a pair of pliers to use for odd jobs, but I don't remember seeing any other hammers around."

She stopped, seeing that Schreiner now seemed intent on the contents of an oblong box. "What's in there?" she asked.

A set of socket wrenches," he stated briefly. "But the drive—the handle, that is—is missing. Do you know where it is?"

"No. I don't even know what it looks like."

"It's a round steel rod. I'd judge the drive to this set would be a good twelve inches long. And heavy."

"Heavy?" Alma felt as if she'd shrieked the word. She hadn't, of course. She'd simply said it in a louder tone than usual.

The police chief looked less affable. "It's heavy enough to make a good weapon," he said. "You must have some idea what happened to it, Mrs. Walbridge. Do you loan things out? Do the neighbors help themselves to your tools?"

"Well, we borrow from each other now and then, mostly in the summer, though—garden tools when we're working outdoors."

He checked the sockets. "None of them are missing. There's a place for each one, you see. If anyone borrowed the drive they'd borrow a socket to go with it."

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"Yes," Alma said faintly. "I can't imagine what's become of it, Mr. Schreiner."

He was bending over the tool chest again. He picked up the hammers and took them to a window to look at them in a better light. He remarked dryly, "It seems your husband tried to protect his tools. He scratched a W on the handle." He put the hammers back in the chest and examined the other tools in it. "Yes, he marked all of them. If the drive turns up——"

He left the sentence unfinished. Alma could fill it in for herself. If the drive turned up in the wood where Arthur Trepp's body was found it could be identified. A few minutes later he left, asking her to go on looking for the drive and to let him know if she found it. Alma said she would. They both knew she wouldn't find it.

The moment he was gone she went in the kitchen for a glass of water. It didn't relieve the parched, tight feeling in her throat. It needed no clairvoyance to picture herself in the role of chief suspect in the letter carrier's murder. She had talked to him the day it happened and apparently she was the only person on the street who had. He told his wife that night that he had an appointment with a woman on Woodside Avenue and he meant Alma. She hadn't had an appointment with him, but nevertheless he must have been on his way to see her when he was killed.

Alma rubbed her forehead with the heel of her palm, trying to clear her thoughts. Where had Arthur Trepp got the idea that he had an appointment with her? Nothing, not one word, had been said about an appointment when he phoned her. He hadn't even suggested one. She'd told him she had friends coming for bridge at eight, so how could he have expected her to be free to see him? Perhaps he thought there'd be time enough for them to talk before anyone arrived for the bridge game. But he couldn't have said he had an appointment with her. His wife must have misunderstood him . . .

Alma heard footsteps overhead and Susan's voice. Schreiner had left just in time.

As Alma was thinking this, Susan came rushing downstairs and into the kitchen in pajamas and a robe. She gave Alma a hug and kiss, announced that she was starved, and went on to talk about what a good time she'd had at Barbara's party last night. She'd been invited over this afternoon to listen to records, she said. A boy she'd met last night, a perfectly adorable boy, was going to be there too. His name was Peter Hutton, did Alma know him? What a doll he was!

Susan chattered on with bubbling enthusiasm. Alma listened

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and smiled and made suitable comment, pouring fruit juice, putting bacon on to cook. She heard bath water running upstairs; Muriel was up.

Alma watched Susan while she ate, thinking how fresh and pretty she looked. Although she was growing up fast this past year, the zest with which she ate and chattered hadn't changed; she'd had that zest for things since she was a very small girl.

Unexpectedly, as she watched her, tears sprang into Alma's eyes and she lowered her head to blink them back. Susan, seventeen next summer, was at such a defenseless age. She could be hurt so badly. When Alma herself had been Susan's age——

But that didn't bear thinking of at all. Alma forced herself to give her attention to what the girl was saying about Peter Hutton, agreeing that from what she knew of him he was quite a nice boy and a prominent athlete at high school.

When Schreiner arrived at the police station he found that a teletype report on Alma and Arthur Trepp had come in from Lacostia. It stated that no link between the two could be established, that they were not known to have had any friends or activities in common. Neither had a police record in Lacostia, their general reputations were good.

Then Susan's name entered into the report. Although her parents were living in Lacostia at the time of her birth, she had been born in Des Moines, Iowa. According to a lifelong neighbor of the Halls, Mrs. Hall and Mrs. Walbridge had gone to Des Moines to take care of a relative who was ill and had remained there for several months. At that time Mrs. Walbridge was seventeen years old and unmarried.

Schreiner drew the same inference from this part of the report that the Lacostia police must have drawn since they had seen fit to include it.

Soon thereafter an inquiry was on its way to the Des Moines police and a second teletype message was sent to the Lacostia police, asking if they would obtain pictures of Mrs. Walbridge and Mrs. Hall taken around the time they went to Des Moines and forward them to the Des Moines police.

After Susan left the house that afternoon to go to Barbara's, Alma told her sister about the police chief's visit and the missing wrench drive.

"We've got to find it," Muriel said urgently. "It must be around somewhere."

They searched the whole house and then the garage. They didn't find the wrench drive.

But outside in the wood the search for the murder weapon went on.

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It ended two days later when the wrench drive was found in a hollow tree stump some distance away from the area where the search was first made.

A W was scratched on the drive. Schreiner sent it immediately to the State Police Identification Bureau for examination. Then, waiting until Alma was away from home, he helped himself to another initialed tool from the late Robert Walbridge's tool chest and sent it along to the bureau, asking that the two Ws be compared.

He didn't allow it to become known that the drive had been found. He didn't go to see Alma about it. He made no move in her direction while he waited to hear from the bureau.

He was also waiting for a report from the Des Moines police. When it came he expected it to confirm the motive he had already assigned to Alma for Arthur Trepp's murder.

The following Friday he received the Identification Bureau's report. It said that the wrench drive was the murder weapon. A hair caught in the spring matched Arthur Trepp's, and a blood smear found on it was of the same type as his. The Ws on the drive and on the other tool Schreiner had sent along had been scratched on by the same hand.

When the police chief finished reading the report he gave thought to his next step. He didn't have enough evidence against Alma Walbridge to arrest her, not with the garage standing open to anyone and the tool chest unlocked. They could search for the key to the chest, but even if they found it it wouldn't prove that the chest was usually kept locked and had been left unlocked only since the murder. There was no way to prove that. . . .

What he still lacked was motive. He had weapon and opportunity, motive would give him a tight case.

Three times he had questioned Alma Walbridge at her home and learned nothing from her. Now he had enough evidence against her, he decided, to drop the kid-glove approach. He would have her brought in for questioning.

An hour later she entered his office escorted by the cruiser officer. "Good morning, Mrs. Walbridge," he said. "Sit down, won't you?" He drew up a chair for her.

Alma sat down. She looked at the police chief as if she didn't see him, as if he weren't there. Her face was white and still.

He wasted no words on preliminaries. "We found your wrench drive in the woods, Mrs. Walbridge," he said. "We've had tests made on it. It's the murder weapon. Trepp was killed with it."

Alma made no reply. She went on looking at Schreiner in the same unseeing fashion.

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He drew his scanty brows together. "Would you care to tell me how your wrench drive became the murder weapon?"

"I don't know." When you felt trapped and doomed by something that had begun with laughter on a June night more than seventeen years ago you had no excess of words with which to combat your fate. You'd thought you knew all there was to know of disillusionment, shame, and anguish. You hadn't foreseen this ultimate penalty that was still to be exacted because, like Browning's Duchess, your heart had been too soon made glad, too easily impressed. . . .

"Did you loan or give the drive to anyone, Mrs. Walbridge?"

"No."

"Did you kill Trepp with it yourself?"

"No."

"Do you have any idea who took it?"

"No."

"When it was taken?"

"No."

"Are you trying to tell me it grew wings and flew out the garage?"

"No."

Schreiner's questions, Alma's monosyllabic replies went on and on leading them nowhere.

The police chief disliked browbeating people, he particularly disliked browbeating a woman like Alma Walbridge, but if he wanted results, he told himself, somehow he'd have to break through that frozen attitude of hers.

"Mrs. Walbridge." He raised his voice to a harsh note. "We're not getting very far, are we? You're in a bad spot, and if you want to get out of it you'll have to give me more information. I want to know what you really talked to Trepp about the day he was murdered and why you made an appointment with him.

"I've talked to the friends who played bridge with you and they say they didn't get to your house until eight or after. Trepp left his before seven. I know from the pathologist's report on the stomach contents that Trepp was murdered within half an hour or so after he started out to keep his appointment with you. He could walk to your house in fifteen minutes, Mrs. Walbridge, and not long after the time it would take him to do it he was dead. He was dead before your friends arrived to play bridge. You say you were home alone during that time, but that's not an answer that will do you any good. You had the opportunity to kill Trepp. The weapon that was used came from your garage. All I need is the motive, and I could make a good guess at what it was. I won't do it, though, until I've had a reply to an inquiry I sent out." Schreiner paused to lend effect to his next words. "An inquiry to the Des Moines police."

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"The Des Moines——" Alma's voice failed her.

He had gained his effect. Horror and dismay erased the mask-like expression her face had worn. It looked stark and beaten. Her hands were half raised as if to ward off a physical blow.

He was right about the Des Moines thing, Schreiner thought, but as he looked at her he felt no pride in himself for what he was doing. He had to go on with it, though; he couldn't let personal feelings prevail over what his job required of him.

Alma's eyes were dark with despair, but she tried to keep it out of her voice as she asked, "Why an inquiry to the Des Moines police, Mr. Schreiner?"

"I think you know why, Mrs. Walbridge."

She folded her hands in her lap. She swallowed hard, he could see her throat move with the effort. She said, "I have no idea."

"They'll begin with the hospital records and personnel, Mrs. Walbridge. They have pictures of you and your sister taken around the time you went to Des Moines. They'll show them around, they'll obtain your home address in Des Moines from the hospital, the name of the attending doctor, they'll look for information in a number of places. Eventually they'll get it."

Alma still tried to fight back. "I don't know why you tell me this, Mr. Schreiner. It doesn't—concern me."

The police chief did not reply. After a moment she went on, "I know nothing about the wrench drive, I know nothing about Mr. Trepp's murder, I can give you no help in solving it. I've answered your questions as well as I can, and I must ask you to let me go home now."

Her voice had taken on a steady note. She had drawn upon inner resources for it; she wasn't going to break no matter what he said to her.

She was never going to break, Schreiner realized suddenly. Whatever case he made against her would have to be made fact by fact.

He might as well let her go for the present, he decided. He hadn't enough evidence to arrest her until he heard from the Des Moines police.

She was driven home by the cruiser officer who had taken her to headquarters. Mrs. Charland was still there. It wasn't even lunch time, Alma noted with tired surprise; her ordeal had lasted less than two hours. She brushed aside Mrs. Charland's flutterings with an abruptness that was foreign to her and retreated to her own room.

Here she dropped down on the bed to contemplate, dry-eyed and motionless, the impending exposure of all that she had spent her

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adult life concealing from everyone except for three people, Robert Walbridge, Muriel, and Muriel's husband.

The chief of police, after Alma's departure, put in a call to state police headquarters and made arrangements to have their detectives, unknown locally, assigned to watching Alma. He composed a follow-up inquiry to the Des Moines police and then drove to the Abbottsville Trust Company. After some consultation the bank officials, with the prospect of a subpoena hanging unmentioned between them and the police chief, produced the record of Alma's account.

Schreiner studied it, copied the figures that interested him, and went on to the question of what other assets Alma had. Her ownership of a shore cottage came up. The police chief saved himself a trip to the bank in the town where the cottage was located by persuading one of the Abbottsville bank officials to call it for him. Adding the information obtained from that source to what he already had found out at the Abbottsville bank, he felt well satisfied with the way Alma's motive for murder was shaping up.

He wasn't disturbed by the fact that the dead man's safe deposit box and joint account with his wife hadn't disclosed unexplained sums of money at the time they were examined. If Trepp was blackmailing Alma Walbridge he wouldn't have kept money he got from her in the local bank, Schreiner thought.

Back at his office he called up Inspector Madden. The latter wasn't in, he was told, and wasn't expected back until late in the day, if at all. When Schreiner identified himself he was given the name of the town where the inspector could be reached at the post office. He put in a person-to-person call to him there and said, "I'm sorry to bother you Inspector, but something's come up in the Trepp murder that I'd like to talk to you about. Would it be possible for you to stop at my office on your way back to Dunston tonight?"

He said, "Well, if you're going to be at your office this evening I'll try to make it. It might be eight or nine o'clock before I could get there. That all right with you?"

"I'll be here," Schreiner said and thanked him and hung up.

At seven o'clock that evening Madden closed the books at the post office where he was working. The inspector stopped at a wayside restaurant for dinner and bought a copy of the Dunston *Times*. He was free to give thought to the reason for Schreiner's call to him, and he turned to the paper while he waited for his meal to be served. Arthur Trepp's murder was back on the front page under a headline that said the

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murder weapon, a socket wrench drive, had been found and its ownership believed to have been established. Schreiner, however, had been discreet, withholding mention of Alma's name and saying as little as possible to the *Times* reporter.

Schreiner had more than the ownership of the wrench drive on his mind in calling him, Madden reflected as he ate his dinner. The blackmail letters?

It was nearly nine o'clock when the inspector arrived at the Abbottsville police station. Schreiner, waiting for him in his office, drew up a comfortable chair for him and said, "You work late hours, Inspector."

Madden smiled. "Well, so do you, Mr. Schreiner." He changed the subject by saying, "According to the Dunston *Times* you've got the murder weapon and you've established the ownership."

"That's right. The drive came from Mrs. Walbridge's garage. It was part of a set of tools that belonged to her husband. I can't arrest her, though, just on the strength of the weapon, because her garage isn't kept locked and the tool chest isn't kept locked either. So now I'm working on the motive and I think I'm on the right track. I think Trepp was blackmailing her."

Madden looked at him without expression. "What grounds do you think he had?"

"I'm going on the theory that when she was a young girl Mrs. Walbridge had an illegitimate daughter. Mrs. Walbridge's sister, Mrs. Hall, the one who lives in Lacostia, is supposed to be the mother of this girl who is known as Susan Hall, but I think she's really Mrs. Walbridge's daughter. A few months before she was born the two sisters left Lacostia—to take care of aunt in Des Moines who was ill, they said—and they stayed until after the baby was born, supposedly to Mrs. Hall. I've asked the Des Moines police to check on it for me and I'm waiting to hear from them."

"Is this something that's generally known—or suspected, at least—in Lacostia?" Madden inquired.

"No, it isn't. The Lacostia police had to dig for it. But they got the idea and passed it on to me and I got in touch with the Des Moines police about it."

"If it wasn't known or even suspected in Lacostia, how do you think Trepp, after all the years he's been away from there, got on to it?" Madden's tone was neutral, indicating neither belief nor disbelief, but mentally he was looking at Susan Hall in Alma's living room, tall as her aunt, resembling her far more than she resembled her supposed mother.

"I think Trepp was the girl's father," Schreiner announced. "That's how he knew. He could have been in touch with her all

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these years but I'm inclined to doubt it. I think this thing began after he was put on the route that included Woodside Avenue. Before that he needn't have known who she was; they moved in different social circles here just as they did in Lacostia. But then, after he was assigned to the route, he recognized Mrs. Walbridge. It seems that it wasn't until after her husband died a year ago last summer that he started blackmailing her. At least that's the way I figured it out," Schreiner concluded.

David Madden made no immediate reply. He was again conjuring up his hazy memory of the mild, quiet little letter carrier, and he found it extremely difficult to cast him in the role of Alma Walbridge's lover years ago in Lacostia.

"Have you been able to establish that they knew each other when they were both living in Lacostia?"

"No, I haven't, and it's a point that bothers me. The Lacostia police have checked and double-checked on it, they say, and haven't been able to establish a contact between them. Seems Trepp lived in a boardinghouse and worked as a clerk for an electric supply company on the other side of town from where Mrs. Walbridge lived."

"She wouldn't have met him through going to the place where he worked?"

"No, it wasn't a place where she'd be likely to go."

"That leaves you with quite a loose end in your theory on Susan Hall," Madden commented.

"Yeah, I know it. I'm thinking of making a trip to Lacostia myself someday soon to look into it."

"That might be a good idea," Madden said and all at once felt convinced that no matter who Susan's father was Alma Walbridge was her mother. When she had told him she couldn't take the risk of publicity, of injuring an innocent person by it, she was thinking of Susan, of protecting her.

She had gone on to say she would never let the matter become public property, that she would have to find some way to handle it herself.

Well then, he thought, she had handled it. She had killed the blackmailer. There it was, cause and effect.

Madden's instinct was to reject this conclusion. Alma Walbridge had given him the impression of meaning every word she said when she told him she knew nothing of Trepp's murder. There had been no hesitation, no reservations in what she said. She had looked very honest—and very appealing in the firelight—when she said it.

"Don't be an ass, letting your feelings get mixed up in this," he admonished himself and gave his attention to what Schreiner was

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saying about Alma's bank account.

"She sold two thousand dollars' worth of Series E Bonds a year ago last November," the police chief stated. "She took the money in cash and drew another five hundred from her checking account. In other words, she walked out of the bank with twenty-five hundred in cash. Blackmail money, I think."

"Yes," Madden said.

"She lives on a trust fund of seven hundred a month from her husband's estate. Then he left her the bonds, the house on Woodside Avenue, and a cottage at the shore. Last May she mortgaged the cottage for twenty-five hundred dollars and took it in cash. Another blackmail payment, let's say. The same amount as before and about six months apart. I'm assuming there was a demand for a third payment last month and she'd about reached the end of her resources in ready cash—she has several hundred in her checking account but she has her house to keep up—she lives well, she runs a good car, she doesn't have too much in reserve out of her income. I think she decided she couldn't go on paying Trepp forever, so she made an appointment for him to come to her house to see her, and when he got there she caught him unawares with the wrench drive and killed him. I'm going to get a warrant tomorrow to search her house and car for traces of blood and other evidence. Like that gold coin Trepp wore on his watch chain. We've never found it. We'll look for it, we'll look for anything and everything we can find."

Madden tried—and failed—to summon up a picture of Alma making a brutal surprise attack on Trepp with the wrench drive and then going ahead with the grim and strenuous activities involved in getting rid of the body. The evidence said she had done these things but he couldn't persuade himself to accept it.

He found grounds on which to base his objection to all that Schreiner had said. "How could Trepp," he asked, "married himself and working in a civil service job, have taken a chance on blackmailing Mrs. Walbridge? If he was Susan Hall's father, he couldn't afford a scandal about it any more than Mrs. Walbridge could."

"He could gamble that she couldn't be sure he'd mind if the whole thing came out. That's one way I figured it. The other way would be that he didn't approach her directly, she didn't know at first who was blackmailing her."

"If he was the father of the child, she'd know who was blackmailing her the minute it started."

"Not if she hadn't recognized him. Maybe she didn't, if she hadn't seen him all these years. He was a lot older than her, he'd have changed more than she did. Maybe . . ."

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Schreiner's voice trailed off into silence as he caught Madden's eye. Then he resumed stubbornly, "It could've happened like that. He was just the mailman to her when he was assigned to that route. Maybe she didn't talk to him more than a few times a year."

Madden still looked skeptical. Schreiner said, "All right, so I'm wrong on that angle. We'll let it go for now. Something else I'm wondering about is how he made his demands. From what I know of him, I don't think he had the gumption to ring Mrs. Walbridge's doorbell and ask for money. Did he do it on the phone or did he make his arrangements with her by mail? Blackmail through the mails."

Madden eyed the police chief with a growing respect. The latter was nobody's fool, he was closing in steadily on Alma Walbridge. It was time for Madden to reappraise his own position in the affair. He had treated Alma Walbridge's visit to his office as confidential. But now the situation had changed, and the police had traced the murder weapon to her, and it constituted a strong piece of evidence against her. Her visit to Madden's office should now be disclosed.

Schreiner went on, "That's what I wanted to see you about, Inspector. After I went to the bank today I started thinking about how Trepp made his demands. If he did use the mails, there might be something, I thought, some hint of it, around the post office. Something I wouldn't catch but you would."

Madden said, "Nothing has come up at the post office but Mrs. Walbridge was being blackmailed through the mails. She came to see me about it." He went on to tell the police chief about his first meeting with Alma, details of their conversation, and her decision not to file a complaint because she wasn't prepared to risk the publicity that might come out of it.

Schreiner nodded as he listened, his gratification over what the inspector was relating to him outweighing his displeasure over not having learned it before this.

"So there it is," he said when the inspector came to the end of what he had to tell him. "All tied together. She couldn't face publicity, she couldn't go on paying blackmail forever, so she took care of the problem by killing Trepp."

"It looks that way," Madden conceded. "If Trepp was the blackmailer."

"If he was? Who else could it be?"

The inspector's reply took the form of a question of his own. "Was Trepp spending freely or did any of the money show up in his estate?"

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"He wasn't spending it and none of it showed up at the Abbottsville bank. But then I wouldn't expect him to advertise what he was doing by putting the money in his account there."

"Still, five thousand dollars—more than he'd make in a year—would lead you to think he'd splurge somewhere."

"Not necessarily. I think he salted it away in another bank in a safe-deposit box under an assumed name. If he did, God knows when it will turn up."

Madden nodded and glanced at his watch. "Ten o'clock. Time I got home. It's been a long day."

"Well, thanks for coming, Inspector, and for the help you've given me. By the way, if we find the blackmail letters when we search her house where do you stand?"

"Trepp is dead. There's nothing I can do about him. You can't prosecute a dead man." Madden stood up and put on his overcoat.

"What about recovering the money?"

"You haven't found any traces of it, you haven't found a shred of evidence that Trepp ever had it."

Schreiner stared at him, started to make a comment, changed his mind, and said, "Well, thanks anyway, Inspector."

"You're welcome. Good night, Mr. Schreiner."

"Good night." Schreiner was still staring at him as he left.

The latter got in his car and turned it toward Dunston. Slumped down in weariness behind the wheel he reflected that unlike Schreiner he couldn't see the affair as all tied together. He kept discovering dangling bits and pieces that the police chief, for all his shrewdness, didn't or wouldn't see.

For instance, such bits and pieces as the kind of people involved. Arthur Trepp, self-effacing respectable government employee and seemingly devoted husband. Alma Walbridge, fastidious, well-balanced, an intelligent woman, gentle in speech and behavior. The one a blackmailer, the other a murderer? Madden shook his head. As for Susan Hall being Trepp's daughter—that seemed the most improbable point of all.

CHAPTER SIX

The next day was Saturday and Alma was getting ready to go downtown to do her weekend shopping when her doorbell rang shortly before ten o'clock.

She found Police Chief Schreiner on the threshold accompanied by two other men in uniform. Alma looked at them with a sinking feeling in her stomach that had become all too familiar lately, said "Good morning," and stepped back to admit them.

"This is Sergeant Bocca, Mrs. Walbridge, and Sergeant Long of

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the state police." As he made the introduction Schreiner reached in his pocket and brought out a document. He said, "This is a warrant that allows us to search your house and premises and car, Mrs. Walbridge. Will you read it, please?"

Wordlessly Alma read it.

She drew in a quick breath and handed the warrant back to the police chief. "Where do you want to begin your search?"

"Well, I guess I'll start in the library, Mrs. Walbridge." Schreiner spoke with some embarrassment. "Sergeant Bocca can start in one of the other rooms and Sergeant Long will search your car and garage." He glanced past her into the library which opened off the hall across from the living room. "Are all the desk drawers unlocked?"

"The—desk?" Alma stepped back in the library doorway as if to protect the desk. She eyed the police chief in consternation. "I keep my personal papers there. I really can't let—"

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Walbridge, but the warrant gives me the right of thorough search. If the desk drawers are locked I must ask you for the key to them."

There was no hope, no appeal from Schreiner's unrelenting gaze. The blackmail letters that she hadn't been able to bring herself to destroy were locked in one of the desk drawers and she would have to produce the key to it.

She moved ahead of him into the library, took the key from behind a book on one of the shelves, and handed it to him. Then while the other two officers vanished toward the rear of the house Alma went back in the hall and started upstairs. Pride kept her head high, her hand from grasping the banister for support while the police chief stood watching her. She reached the second floor, went in her bedroom, and closed the door.

Her mind began to work clearly as soon as she was alone. She must call her lawyer right away, she should have called him last night. This was Saturday, he wouldn't be at his office.

She sat down on the side of the bed, picked up the extension phone on the table beside it, dialed the operator, and gave her Mr. Bartlett's home telephone number.

He was shocked into momentary speechlessness when she told him she was about to be arrested for murder. He rallied, asked questions that informed him on the situation, and said he would be right out to do what he could to protect her immediate interests. He went on, "My firm doesn't handle criminal cases, though. You'll need someone with experience in that field, Mrs. Walbridge. Griffen Clark, I think. He's the best criminal lawyer in Dunston. I won't take time right now to try to locate him, I'll wait until I've seen

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you and have a clearer picture of what the developments are going to be."

"Whatever you think is advisable, Mr. Bartlett," Alma said. "I don't know—" there was a catch in her voice, "what to think myself. I can't believe——"

"Perhaps things aren't as bad as they look," Mr. Bartlett said reassuringly. "I'll be there as fast as I can, Mrs. Walbridge. And until I arrive, answer no questions."

"All right, Mr. Bartlett. Thank you." Alma hung up and leaned back against the headboard of the bed.

When Sergeant Bocca came upstairs to start searching the second floor Alma went down to the living room. Schreiner joined her there and sat down with the blackmail letters in his hand. She looked at them remotely.

The police chief said, "Trepp wrote these letters to you, didn't he?"

"I prefer not to discuss them, Mr. Schreiner. I prefer not to talk at all."

"They pretty well speak for themselves, Mrs. Walbridge." Schreiner's tone was patient. He had his case now, a report had come in early that morning from the Des Moines police stating that Susan was Alma's daughter, that Alma and her sister had exchanged identities in Des Moines, with Alma posing as Mrs. Hall and using her name when she entered the hospital where Susan was born. A few weeks after Susan's birth the two sisters had left Des Moines and were not known to have ever returned there. They had gone back to Lacostia, Schreiner knew, with Mrs. Hall claiming Susan as her own child.

Schreiner continued, "I received a report from Des Moines this morning, Mrs. Walbridge, stating that your niece Susan Hall is actually your daughter."

Alma's lips moved as if to speak but she said nothing. She looked away from the police chief out the window.

The latter lapsed into silence himself, listening to Sergeant Bocca's footsteps overhead, the sound of drawers opening and closing. He wished Sergeant Bocca and the state police sergeant would hurry up and finish the search. He didn't enjoy sitting here in the mute company of a woman he was going to arrest on a murder charge. He looked at Alma, white-faced and silent in her chair. You'd think she was a statue, he reflected uncomfortably. Except for her eyes, her living, suffering eyes.

When Mr. Bartlett arrived Alma admitted him and introduced him to Schreiner. The lawyer, a little old gnome of a man, fastened a bright penetrating gaze on the police chief and said, "Now, if you'll tell me what's going on here——"

The police chief brought out the

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warrant and handed it to him. While he was reading it Sergeant Bocca entered the room and signaled to his superior with a headshake that he'd found nothing incriminating upstairs.

Mr. Bartlett returned the warrant to Schreiner. "Seems to be in order," he conceded. "But I would like to know——"

Schreiner interrupted him, addressing himself to Alma. "Mrs. Walbridge," he said, speaking in a formal tone of voice, "I'm going to take you to the police station with me for questioning on the murder of Arthur Trepp."

Mr. Bartlett bristled, demanding to know what evidence Schreiner had against his client, he exclaimed about such high-handed procedures, he declared the whole thing a fantasy. Schreiner listened unmoved; this wasn't the first lawyer he'd met as an adversary. He said to Alma, "If you'll get your hat and coat, Mrs. Walbridge . . ."

Inside the station Schreiner moved away from her to issue instructions in an undertone to the desk sergeant. Then he took her in his office and allowed Mr. Bartlett to accompany her. Sure of his case, Schreiner wanted to make things as easy as possible for her.

He filled in her questionnaire card himself. Her name, her age, her marital status, occupation, this data Alma supplied with Mr. Bartlett nodding assent. Her face felt cold and stiff.

Schreiner laid the questionnaire card aside, leaned back in his chair, and asked, "How old were you, Mrs. Walbridge, when you first met Arthur Trepp?"

Alma's glance sought Mr. Bartlett. "Don't answer that question," he said.

Schreiner, as if he hadn't heard him, went on, "He was the father of your child, wasn't he?"

"What?" Alma, this time, didn't look to her lawyer for guidance. She stared at the police chief in stunned disbelief and cried, "Of course not! What an idea! I never laid eyes on him until he began delivering my——"

"Mrs. Walbridge!" the lawyer interjected sharply, and she subsided, although she still wore a look of disbelief and her face, chalk-white before, flamed with color.

Schreiner, taken aback by Alma's vehemence, gave his attention to straightening some papers on his desk. He hadn't expected such a ringing denial from her that Trepp was Susan Hall's father. Inspector Madden, he remembered, hadn't gone along with the idea when he'd propounded it to him, dwelling on the fact that Schreiner hadn't been able to discover any acquaintance between the two in Lacostia. What if she went on denying that she'd ever known Trepp in the past and he was unable to prove that she had?

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These were questions that had their unnerving aspects. Unless he could disprove Alma Walbridge's statement that she hadn't known Trepp in Lacostia, that he wasn't her daughter's father, he was faced with the problem of how Trepp had found out that Alma had an illegitimate child. Through someone in Lacostia? But no one there seemed to know anything about the situation. Where else, though, could Trepp have secured his information? Would tampering with her mail have given him the whole story?

Schreiner put aside such questions for the moment as Alma, again disregarding her lawyer, said quietly, "I did not know Mr. Trepp in Lacostia. I never knew him at all until he became my mailman."

Schreiner decided not to argue the point at present. He said, "But you've had reason enough to become aware of him since then, Mrs. Walbridge."

She remained silent.

"Haven't you?" he persisted.

"I'm not going to answer that question."

Mr. Bartlett gave her a nod of approval.

She would answer none of Schreiner's ensuing questions, no matter what approach he used. At intervals Mr. Bartlett protested that this session had gone on long enough, but the police chief disregarded his protests. By midafternoon Alma looked like the ghost of herself, and her laywer professed concern for her physical well-being, reminded Schreiner that none of them had eaten since breakfast.

Schreiner ordered sandwiches and coffee brought in and went on with the questioning. He learned nothing from Alma.

Bornay, the town prosecutor, came into the room. Alma and he had known each other for years. He gave her a constrained greeting as he produced a warrant that charged her with first-degree murder.

Bornay vanished; a few minutes later a policewoman escorted Alma to a room in the rear of the building where she was fingerprinted, weighed, measured, and photographed.

They went back to the police chief's office. Mr. Bartlett smiled at her halfheartedly, Schreiner said, "We'll be ready to leave in a few minutes, Mrs. Walbridge."

"Where are we going?"

"The county jail in Dunston. You'll be held there until you're called before the grand jury."

"And then?"

"If the jury indicts you for murder you'll remain at the county jail until your case comes up in Superior Court."

Alma cleared her throat, trying to dislodge the hard lump that filled it suddenly. "I'd like to go home first and pack some things."

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"You don't need to do that today, Mrs. Walbridge. They'll supply whatever you need in the women's department at the jail. Later, perhaps you'll be able to arrange to have your sister or someone bring in some of your personal things."

"My sister," Alma said in an attenuated voice, her glance going to Mr. Bartlett. "Will you call her, please? Mrs. Muriel Hall, Grove Street, Lacostia, New York. Tell her——" She broke off looking at him emptily. "I don't know what you can tell her—how you can——"

"I'll call her, I'll explain," Mr. Bartlett said gently.

"My daughter——" Alma couldn't go on. Not since she'd left Des Moines and turned Susan over to Muriel had she spoken those words aloud to anyone. Through all the heart-hungry years she'd said them to herself, my daughter, my daughter, but never aloud. She'd built innumerable dreams around situations in which they could be said, in which Susan could be claimed. But this was not a dream; this was frightful reality.

The tragic hopeless look that settled on her face moved Schreiner to say, "Mrs. Walbridge, it won't be necessary for your daughter to find out about this right away. I'm not going to let anything out about her to the newspapers. They'll know there's a blackmail angle in the case we've got against you, but they won't know what grounds Trepp had for it."

Hope dawned in her eyes. "Isn't there some way, though, that they'll find out?"

"Not from us or from the state's attorney's office. They may pick up a few rumors on it but they won't dare print them without verification. They're not that irresponsible."

"That's right." Mr. Bartlett smiled at Alma encouragingly. The police and the state's attorney don't want to see whatever evidence they have bandied about in the newspapers. Prejudices their case when it goes to trial."

"But at the trial itself——"

"We won't worry about that yet," the lawyer said. "This case isn't ever going to get that far. Wait till you've talked to Clark, Mrs. Walbridge. He'll make you feel much better about the whole thing."

Alma managed a faint smile in return for the beaming one that spread across Mr. Bartlett's gnomelike face.

CHAPTER SEVEN

That weekend Schreiner couldn't dismiss from his mind the question of how Trepp, if he wasn't Susan Hall's father, had found out that she was an illegitimate child. Although he was convinced of Alma's guilt he had unhappy visions of a courtroom scene in which

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Clark, one of the leading criminal lawyers in the state, tore at this weak point in the prosecution's case.

Sunday evening, still worrying about it, Schreiner decided to go to Lacostia the next day and look into it himself.

He left at five o'clock in the morning, reached Lacostia before ten, and spent several hours there conferring with the police chief and the officers who had made the inquiries Schreiner had requested.

The conference was barren of result. No one could suggest a way to prove, seventeen years later, that Alma had known Trepp in Lacostia.

At three o'clock that afternoon Schreiner started back to Abbottsville, his problem still unsolved. He arrived in Dunston on his way home shortly before nine o'clock, having stopped for dinner at a drive-in restaurant along the road. With his uneasiness weighing on him Schreiner's thoughts turned to Inspector Madden. The inspector lived in Dunston, why not have a talk with him tonight?

He went in a drugstore and phoned Madden. The latter was home and said yes, it would be perfectly all right for Schreiner to stop in to see him.

When he was seated in Madden's apartment the police chief opened the conversation with a résumé of the events leading up to Alma's arrest on Saturday. "I've sent the blackmail letters by registered mail to the documents section of the FBI," he said. "But first I had some photostatic copies made of them. I brought a set of them with me today. Here, you look at them." He took them out of an inside pocket and leaned forward to hand them to Madden who sat opposite him.

Madden looked first at the cancellation marks on the faces of the envelopes. There were four of them. Each one was that of a different but nearby town, as Alma had told him on her visit to his office. The dates on two of them—November 10, 1954 and December 2, 1955—were clear, but the other two were too faint to decipher from the photostats. Schreiner had labeled them so that the letter that went with each envelope was designated. The first one, sent in November 1954, ran:

You must be pleased that your daughter Susan is getting to be such a young lady and doing so well in school. It would be too bad if anything happened to bring disgrace on her—such as having the facts of her birth become known. You wouldn't want that, would you? To make sure it doesn't happen, get hold of $2500—that's not much for a woman as well off as you are—in tens and twenties and send it in a parcel-post package as merchandise to Jonathan Chase, General Delivery, Strattan, Con-

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necticut. Put it in the mail November 15 but don't mail it from Abbottsville. If you carry out these instructions you won't be bothered again and your secret will be safe.

Madden, reading the instructions for making the payment, felt chagrined that he had missed a point on the clothespin bag when Alma went to his office. He'd taken it for granted that the clothespin bag had been used twice.

The second letter—date indecipherable—ran:

Well, here I am again. I've been spending more money than I should, which makes it necessary for me to bother you again about your little secret. This is positively the last time it will happen. I'll need the same amount, $2500, but I've thought of a simpler payment method. Put the money in the clothespin bag that hangs on the clothes reel in back of your garage on Friday, May 20, along toward dark, say about eight o'clock. Then get in your car and leave. Don't come home before ten o'clock. Do this and it's the last time you'll ever hear from me.

The third letter was the one Alma had brought to Madden's office. He skimmed through it and went on to the fourth. It ran:

You must feel proud that Susan is leading the honor roll in her class. I keep in close touch with her activities, you see, and it would certainly be too bad if the truth about her came out. She wouldn't be able to hold her head up among her schoolmates. Do you want that to happen? Is that why you didn't put the money in the clothespin bag when you were supposed to? You'd better think it over. Maybe you're short of money with Christmas so near. That's why I'm giving you another chance. Have the money in the clothespin bag on Thursday, December 29, without fail. If it isn't there, Susan will have to suffer for it and I'll see that she does.

"That poor woman," Madden said, laying the set of photostats on an adjacent table.

"Yeah, Trepp gave her a tough time. But that didn't give her the right to kill him." Schreiner shook his head. "The things people do when they get in a tight spot. . . . Well, that's neither here nor there." His voice took on a brisker note. "What about the payment she made by parcel post? Would there be a record of it in the Strattan post office?"

"Not of an uninsured parcel."

"Wouldn't a stranger have to identify himself there before he could collect it?"

"According to regulations, yes. But what would probably happen would be that he'd go in the post office and say something like, 'My

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name is Jonathan Chase and I'm expecting a package general delivery from Mrs. Robert Walbridge, 146 Woodside Avenue, Abbottsville, Connecticut.' The package would be there and the clerk would probably hand it over to him, without question since he could describe it so well.

"The clothespin bag must have seemed less risky," Madden said.

"I'd prefer it myself," Schreiner agreed. He yawned. "Been a long day. I'm getting to the age when I feel a trip like that. Especially a wasted trip."

Schreiner paused and pulled at his bulbous nose in thought. Then he said, "If I have to write off Lacostia, if I can't find any evidence that shows Trepp knew Mrs. Walbridge there and could have been her daughter's father, all I've got left to go on is what he said to his wife about being accused of tampering with someone's mail. I've never thought much of it. It's not very solid."

His tone was heavy with discontent. Madden thought he knew why. The police chief had worked out his own tidy theory of the murder, one that gave little weight to Trepp's statement to his wife, and now he found it difficult to face the prospect of modifying or discarding any part of it.

Madden asked, "Did Mrs. Walbridge tell you she accused Trepp of tampering with her mail?"

"Mrs. Walbridge didn't tell me anything. Her lawyer told her to clam up and that's just what she's done. Nobody's talking right now. I went to see Mrs. Trepp yesterday and she'd barely speak to me, she was in such a state over her husband being called a blackmailer. He'd never do such a thing, she says, and she's demanding that I prove he did it by tracing the blackmail money to him. He never had a cent beyond his pay, according to her. But how can I prove it? I don't know what bank he put the money in or what name he used." Schreiner shook his head. "I'm stymied in a lot of ways. For instance, I can't find the typewriter Trepp wrote the blackmail letters on. I've had the post office typewriters checked and a couple of others that were owned by post office employees. Yesterday I had men spending their whole day checking with people Trepp knew to see if they had a typewriter they let him use. Today I had a couple of men assigned to covering agencies in Dunston to see if he rented one. I called the station after I talked to you tonight and they said he didn't rent a typewriter anywhere in Dunston."

Schreiner sighed. "I guess I was a little ahead of myself talking about everything tying in so well. The county detective was out to see me yesterday, and he's a little worried, too, about just what the relationship was between Mrs.

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Walbridge and Trepp. He says we've got a lot of things to investigate yet, like that tampering with the mail angle."

Schreiner paused and looked at Madden in deliberation. "I told him about you, Inspector. I said you'd know a lot more than I would about how to handle that angle and that I'd have a talk with you about it. He thought it was a good idea, that we've got to get to the bottom of it before the case comes up for trial. He says the fewer loose ends the state's attorney takes into court the better he likes it."

"But——" Madden hesitated and then said, "I suppose you realize, Mr. Schreiner, that the murder itself and the kind of case the state's attorney takes into court on it are matters that I wouldn't have any reason to enter into. But if you mean you have certain doubts about whether or not Trepp was the person who blackmailed Mrs. Wal——"

"Oh, they're not exactly doubts," Schreiner broke in hastily. "I wouldn't have arrested her unless I was sure of her motive for killing Trepp. But let's suppose I'm wrong about how he knew she had a child. Let's suppose he found it out from tampering with her mail, reading something her sister wrote to her that gave him the facts. What bothers me is how, in the first place, he knew there'd be something worth reading in her letters from Lacostia; and in the second place, how he knew which letters to open. And when he opened them.

"Suppose this case goes to trial —and it will, the grand jury is bound to indict her—and Clark, her lawyer, says, 'All right, it's true Mrs. Walbridge was being blackmailed. But where is the state's proof that Arthur Trepp was the person who blackmailed her?' We've got to be able to prove it was him," Schreiner continued. "Otherwise Clark will keep hammering on the point that we haven't established a motive."

Madden nodded. "I see what you mean."

"I know that's my problem, not yours," Schreiner said. "But just suppose for a minute that Clark, when he played it that way, had something. Suppose Trepp wasn't the blackmailer. Where would you stand then, Inspector?"

Madden, who liked the Abbottsville police chief, told himself that he really must take him off the hook. He said, "Mr. Schreiner, as long as you don't feel altogether satisfied in your own mind about where Trepp fits into the picture, do you want me to make an investigation of the blackmail letters?"

"That's what I want," Schreiner replied. "And the sooner the better as far as I'm concerned."

The inspector continued, "First of all, I'll try to see Mrs. Wal-

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bridge and in order to get anywhere with her I'll have to assure her that I'll respect her confidence regarding whatever she cares to tell me—assuming, of course, that she doesn't refuse to tell me anything."

"She might open up to you. You're not trying to get her convicted of murder."

"But she knows you are, Mr. Schreiner, and that's why I have to make it clear to her that I won't immediately turn over to you any information she gives me. It won't be possible for me to keep you informed as I go along. I'm afraid you'll have to wait for the final results of my investigation. I hope that's all right with you."

After a moment's hesitation the police chief replied, "Yes, I guess it is." His expression revealed that he wasn't happy about it but was resigning himself to the fact that what David Madden said made sense, that there was, indeed, no other way in which he would conduct an investigation.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The next morning Madden went to the county jail to see Alma. He was taken to the women's department and shown into a small room. A few minutes later Alma appeared, escorted by a matron who immediately withdrew, closing the door after her.

"Good morning, Mrs. Waldbridge," David Madden said, giving the greeting a matter-of-fact inflection.

"Good morning." Alma halted just inside the door, looking at him in surprise. She wore a gray wool dress, her hair had the shining, well-brushed look he had noticed the first time he met her, her make-up was carefully applied. At first glance there was nothing about her appearance to indicate that she was an inmate of a jail. But Madden, studying her closely, saw that her ordeal revealed itself in the shadows under her eyes and in her drawn, sorrowful expression.

"They didn't tell me who was here, Mr. Madden," Alma added. "They just said I had a visitor. I thought it was Mr. Clark or Mr. Bartlett or my sister."

"She's come on from Lacostia?"

"Yes. She's staying at my house." Alma's voice lacked depth. It had a flat, empty sound. As if she sensed that he was wondering where Susan was she went on, "Susan is with Muriel's brother-in-law and his wife. She wants to come to see me, though. I'd rather she didn't, but Muriel told me yesterday that she's called twice from Lacostia to ask when she's going to be allowed to come." A note of pride came into Alma's voice. She was letting Madden know that Susan loved her and wanted to be with her during this awful time.

Madden was touched by it. He

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said, "Well, even if you'd rather not have her here, I think it's wonderful that she wants to come."

Alma had moved only a little way from the door. The inspector drew two of the chairs up to the table and said, "Let's sit down, Mrs. Walbridge, while I tell you why I came."

She sat down in one of the chairs, accepted a cigarette from him, but showed no particular interest in what he might have to say.

Madden began by outlining his position to her. He was not working with the police, he said, and would not report to them after he had seen her. He was only concerning himself with the fact that the mails had been used to extort money from her.

While he was explaining this Alma sat with her head slightly bent in an attitude of thought. She asked, "Did you ever tell Mr. Schreiner about my going to your office?"

The inspector had hoped she wouldn't bring up this question, but he answered it unhesitatingly. "Yes, I did, when he asked me about it. I believe I explained to you that it might work out like that."

"Yes. I just wondered about it. . . . It didn't matter, anyway, since I was foolish enough to keep the letters for Mr. Schreiner to find them. He searched my desk and——" She broke off, turning her head to look at Madden. "But you know all that, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Did Mr. Schreiner show them to you?"

"Photostats of them, yes."

The color that was so quick to come when Alma was embarrassed rose to her face. Madden could guess at her thought: that now she must add his name to the growing list of people who knew that Susan was her illegitimate daughter. He took them past the moment of awkwardness by saying, "That day you came to my office, Mrs. Walbridge, you told me you had no idea who was blackmailing you. Not long afterward you seemed to think it was Trepp. I'd like to know what made you suspect him."

She looked at him steadily. "Mr. Madden, I'm not supposed to discuss my problems with anyone. Both Mr. Bartlett and Mr. Clark have impressed that on me."

"Mrs. Walbridge——" His dark eyes held hers as he made a fresh start. "You already have my assurance that I won't go back to the police with whatever you care to tell me. You have nothing to fear, nothing to lose through answering my questions, and you might have something to gain."

"What could I gain?" she asked.

"I don't know until I hear your story. All I know is, your actions have indicated that you thought Trepp was your blackmailer."

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Alma looked at him, asking herself what there was about this dark, quiet man that inspired such confidence in her. She hardly knew him, there was no reason why he should take a real interest in her desperate plight and yet—

She took a deep breath and folded her hands in her lap. "All right," she said, "I'll tell you what made me suspect Mr. Trepp. After I saw you at your office that day I gave a lot of thought to your suggestion that the blackmailer wrote letters instead of phoning me because I might recognize his voice. There was no way to settle on any one person I knew, but still I kept thinking about it and I didn't even try to get money together to meet the December 16 blackmail payment. I decided I'd wait and see if I got a phone call if I didn't pay up. Then, a couple of days before the payment was due, I happened to be outside talking to a neighbor when Mr. Trepp came along with the mail. There was a letter from my sister in it and he said, 'Here's another letter from the old home town, Mrs. Walbridge.' I took the mail from him and he went on to the next house while I just stood there looking after him. You know how things sometimes seem to click in your mind?"

"Yes," Madden said.

"Well, that's what happened to me. I remembered that a year ago last fall, not too long before the blackmail started, Muriel had written me that—well, that Susan's father—had died." Having faltered momentarily, Alma's voice picked up its even note again and went on, "In still another letter Muriel said something in reference to it that was quite revealing. And then a month or so later the blackmail letters began.

"I thought about this and about the way Mr. Trepp had long ago expressed an interest in my mail from Lacostia. He really brought himself to my attention, you see."

"It didn't occur to you that it was a foolish thing for him to do if he was the blackmailer?" Madden interjected.

She shook her head. "I thought the opposite; that he'd done it deliberately to make himself look innocent."

The inspector didn't agree with her but dropped the matter.

Alma continued, "I knew I'd have to get proof of what I suspected, so I went in the house and called up Muriel and told her to write to me immediately and say that Susan headed the honor roll in her class for the fall term. It wasn't true, you understand, Susan was on the honor roll but she didn't head it. Then I told Muriel to leave the right-hand side of the envelope partly unsealed, about an inch or more of it, and to mail the letter to me right away that very morning. I even told her to take it straight to the post office so

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that it would go faster." Alma paused, her gray eyes intent on the inspector. "It was a test letter, you see."

He nodded and she went on, "The letter didn't reach me until five days later. The Christmas rush was on, of course, but it wasn't so heavy yet that the letter should take that long. Three days, I thought, four at the most, but not five just to come from upper New York State. And when I finally got it the envelope was sealed all around. I called Muriel and she said yes, she'd left it partly unsealed, just an inch of it on the right-hand side as I'd told her to. So then I knew for certain that the letter had been opened and read and resealed. In the meantime I'd let the date for the blackmail payment go by, and two days before Christmas I received another letter from the blackmailer in which he mentioned that Susan headed the honor roll in her class. You saw the letter—or a photostat of it."

"Yes."

"Well, I felt I had all the proof I needed that it was Mr. Trepp who was blackmailing me. But the day the letter came I was driving to Lacostia to spend Christmas with Muriel and Susan, so I did nothing about it then. There was no hurry, anyway, I felt, because in the letter he said he was allowing me a few extra days to get the money together. I locked up the letter with the others in my desk and went to Lacostia and tried to forget the whole thing over Christmas. I didn't get home until Tuesday afternoon and then, Wednesday morning, I waited for Mr. Trepp. I went outside so Mrs. Charland wouldn't hear me, and I told him I knew he was blackmailing me and that I wouldn't pay him another cent. I told him I knew he'd been tampering with my mail to get hold of the information he was using against me and if he didn't stop it I'd complain to the postal authorities."

"What did he say?" Madden asked.

"Oh, he denied the whole thing, of course, and acted as if it came as a complete surprise to him. But I didn't pay one bit of attention to what he said. I told him about the test letter and that I had it put away and knew exactly what I was doing and didn't intend to put up with any more blackmail."

The anger and contempt Alma had felt when she confronted Arthur Trepp echoed in her voice and flashed in her eyes. "You should have seen the way he stood there gaping at me. He kept saying, 'You're making a terrible mistake, Mrs. Walbridge; I don't know what you're talking about, Mrs. Walbridge.' I told him not to bother with denials; just to remember that I meant what I said. Then I went back in the house and that was the last I saw of him."

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Madden's narrow dark eyebrows were drawn in thought. "Nothing he said made you feel the least doubt of his guilt, Mrs. Walbridge?"

She gave him a startled glance. "Why no. I expected him to deny it. What else could he do? But everything pointed to him. He delivered my mail, he——"

"There were other post-office employees who handled your mail, Mrs. Walbridge."

"But what about the phone call I got from him that afternoon?"

"Phone call? What did he say?"

"He said he'd been thinking over our conversation and wanted to get things straightened out with me. He asked if I'd be home that evening and free to talk to him if he called me again between seven and eight. I said yes, I'd be home and free until eight o'clock, when some friends were coming to play bridge. He said that was fine, he couldn't talk now, but he'd call me between seven and eight.

"I didn't know what to make of it," Alma continued, "when I heard he'd told his wife he had an appointment with a woman on Woodside Avenue—me, of course. He didn't have an appointment with me. He didn't even suggest such a thing, he just said he would call me. He didn't call me, though. I was home waiting for his call but it never came."

"Did you recognize his voice on the phone?" Madden asked.

"Well——" She hesitated over her reply. "He spoke in sort of a hurried undertone as if he was afraid he might be overheard. But he was talking about our conversation that morning, something no one else knew about, so there was no reason for me to question his voice."

Madden questioned it. But then, he had an occupational habit of questioning everything. He asked next, "What time did he call you?"

"It was just about two o'clock."

"You're sure of the time?"

"Yes, I am, because Mrs. Charland leaves at two, and she was ready and waiting for me to drive her home when the phone rang. She's very prompt to leave when her time is up."

"Yes, that seems conclusive enough." Madden didn't add that he had thought of a way to check up on the phone call.

Alma found him disconcerting. Suppose it wasn't Mr. Trepp who had called her, she thought. But it must have been Mr. Trepp. No one else knew what they had talked about that morning.

Madden said, "The phone call in itself doesn't prove anything one way or the other about Trepp being the blackmailer, Mrs. Walbridge. He said he wanted to get things straightened out between you. That doesn't necessarily imply guilt."

"No, I suppose it doesn't." Alma sent him a troubled glance.

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Madden returned a preoccupied one. "Do you know many of the people who work at the post office?" he inquired.

"I suppose I do after all the years I've been going there to buy stamps and mail letters and so forth. Why do you ask?"

"Right now, Mrs. Walbridge, I'm merely following up every little detail that occurs to me. I'll have to sort them out later."

She wouldn't accept the evasion. "But there must be some reason why you—oh, voices, you mean. If it wasn't Mr. Trepp on the phone was it someone else at the post office?"

The inspector had more than that in mind about voices but he nodded and said, "Now let's go back to your sister's letters. There were a couple of them a year ago last fall making references to Susan that would convey information to anyone who read them. Before those two were there ever other letters with references of that kind?"

"There were a few over the years because I know I spoke to Muriel about them. But she wasn't as acutely conscious of the need for caution as I was, and two or three other times she said things she shouldn't have."

"Now," he said next, "about the blackmail payments, Mrs. Walbridge—"

"Yes?"

"I have some questions about them—unless this is turning out to be too long a session for you. I don't want to tire you out."

"Oh, you're not," Alma was quick to assure him. "I've been in such a—well, I guess you'd call it a coma—the last few days that this is good for me."

She looked better, too, he thought sitting forward in her chair, her earlier lassitude vanished. He brought out cigarettes again, gave one to her, took one himself, and when he had lit both of them he smiled at her companionably and said, "All right, let's get on with it. Did you get the money out of the bank for the two payments in tens and twenties as you were told to do?"

"Yes. Both times I got one hundred tens and seventy-five twenties."

"Is it too much to hope that you made a record of the serial numbers?"

"No, Mr. Madden, it isn't too much to hope. I did write them down. It took a lot of time and I didn't really think it would mean anything, but I wrote them down the way banks do in kidnaping cases."

"Good girl," Madden said approvingly. "Where's the list?"

"It's in my file at home. I don't think Mr. Schreiner took it—just a list of numbers—or he'd have asked me about it."

"Then we'll hope the list is still there."

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"The parcel-post receipt is in my file too," Alma informed him.

"What receipt?"

"For the first payment I made. The one I mailed to Strattan."

"You insured it? The letter didn't tell you to."

"No, but it didn't seem right to trust all that money to parcel post without insuring it. I thought they'd be more careful of it if it was insured, so I had it valued at fifty dollars."

"Oh Lord," Madden commented and lapsed into thought about the blackmailer signing for the package. That had been in November 1954. Receipts were kept for a full calendar year—but this was mid-January 1956—and after the first of the year the Strattan post office would have destroyed the 1954 receipts. He'd check with them on it, but there was little prospect of getting hold of the one he wanted.

Madden put this thought aside for future consideration and reverted to the test letter. "Do you still have it?" he asked.

"Yes. It's in my correspondence file in my desk, and unless Mr. Schreiner got it all mixed up when he went through it, it's under *t* for test letter."

"And the parcel post receipt?"

"That's in there under *r*."

"What about the list of serial numbers?"

"That's under *m* for money." He grinned. "You have a filing system all your own, haven't you? May I borrow those items? I'll take good care of them."

"Yes, you may take them. Tell my sister I said you could."

"Mrs. Walbridge, I imagine I'll be back and forth to Abbottsville a good bit in the near future," the inspector informed her as he stood up to leave. "Thanks very much for answering so many questions. Perhaps I'll have even more of them later on."

"I'll be glad to answer them." Alma stood up and held out her hand. "Thank you for coming, Mr. Madden. You've made me feel a lot better. More hopeful."

"Good," Madden said and found himself holding her hand a little longer than a handshake required.

"I'll be so anxious to know what you find out," she said. "But I don't suppose——" She looked at him in appeal.

"If anything comes up that I feel I should talk over with you, I'll be back," he assured her.

He opened the door, the matron stepped forward, and with a last glance and smile over her shoulder at him Alma went down the corridor and out of sight.

As Madden left the jail and went to his car he said to himself, "All right, she's interested you since the first time you met her. But maybe she killed Trepp. You don't think so but maybe she did. If it turns out she didn't—well, then you can ask her out to dinner

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and find out what she's like when she's not on a spot like this. In the meantime, keep personal feelings out of it."

But this last, David Madden knew, was easier said than done.

Away from the environs of the county jail, he stopped to put in a phone call to the Strattan post office and learned that all parcel post receipts for 1954 had been destroyed.

When the inspector finished his phone call he drove to Abbottsville and found Schreiner in his office at police headquarters, poring over a report on the blackmail letters that had just come in from the FBI.

"It doesn't help much," he informed Madden, "except for telling us what kind of a typewriter to look for. Royal Standard, probably six or seven years old."

"Well, I'll leave the hunt for the typewriter to you," Madden said. "You have the facilities for it."

He hadn't sat down. He was standing in the doorway and he turned to leave, saying, "I'm going over to the post office now. I'll see you soon."

"Okay," the police chief said and refrained from asking if Madden had seen Mrs. Walbridge yet.

At the post office the inspector sat down with Mr. Buckley over a city map on which the letter carriers' delivery routes were marked with different-colored pencils. Mr. Buckley summoned the superintendent of mails to have him show Madden approximately where Trepp should have been on his route between one forty-five and two-fifteen, the time margin Madden was allowing for Alma's two-o'clock phone call on the day of the murder.

The superintendent's pencil hovered over the green lines on the map, paused at one point, moved back a little, and settled at an intersection which he marked with a cross. His pencil hovered again, and he made another cross. He said, "Grace and Whitney Street intersection at one forty-five and the corner of Monroe Street and White Avenue at two-fifteen. Those would be the outside limits of where he could be if he was going to get through on schedule."

Madden took out his fountain pen, reached for a pad, and made his own map of the indicated area from the city map before him.

Then Madden got out his notebook and said to the postmaster, "Is this list of your distributors correct? William Howell, Roy Dutton, Samuel Mundt, Henry Byrnes."

"Yes, that's right." Mr. Buckley concealed his surprise at the sudden change of subject.

"Those are your regular distributors. Who would substitute for them?"

"Norman Wood or Steve Rodell."

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Their names went down in the inspector's notebook. He said, "Jamieson too," and added his name to the list. Jamieson, the superintendent of mails, came to work at six in the morning, Madden knew, and one of his duties was to help sort the incoming mail. "Will you get out their personnel files, please?"

Mr. Buckley produced the files. The inspector studied them and crossed three names, Mundt, Wood, and Byrnes, off his list. Mundt hadn't started to work at the post office until January 1955, two months after the blackmail began, Wood had been absent on sick leave from October 1955 until the present time, Byrnes had been a letter carrier until May 1955 and had never at any time been assigned to the route that included Woodside Avenue.

Under each of the four names—Howell, Dutton, Rodell, Jamieson—that remained on Madden's list he jotted down addresses, ages, length of service, salaries, demerits, and data connected with days off. Then, after discussing the four men, their home backgrounds, outside interests, personalities, and general reputation in the community with Mr. Buckley, Madden left the post office.

He drove to the intersection of Grace and Whitney Streets, the outermost perimeter of the area in which the dead letter carrier could have been delivering mail at one forty-five on the day of his murder. Using the map he had made as a guide, the inspector then drove through the whole area Trepp could have covered during the half hour he had allotted to him.

It was completely residential without stores or gas stations or other places that might have a public telephone. To have called Alma Walbridge at two o'clock or thereabouts on the day of his death Trepp would have had to use the telephone in some house along the way.

The inspector returned to the intersection that had been his starting point, parked his car, went to the corner house on Whitney Street, and rang the doorbell.

A middle-aged woman answered his ring. Madden opened his identification folder, showed it to her, and said, "I'm making some inquiries about Mr. Trepp, your former letter carrier. Can you tell me if he asked to use your phone during the week after Christmas? That would be the week of his death."

"Oh no, indeed."

"Is there anyone else in your family who might have answered the door and given him permission to use the phone?"

"Not unless it was a Saturday when my husband would be home."

"It wouldn't have been a Saturday."

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"Well then, Mr. Trepp didn't ask. In fact, all the years I've lived here I don't remember him or any other mailman ever asking to use my phone. I guess I'd be surprised if they did."

"Well, so would I," Madden told her smilingly. He touched his hat brim. "Thank you."

"You're welcome, I'm sure." She stood in the doorway watching him in puzzlement as he crossed the lawn to the house next door.

It took the inspector over two hours to cover the area he was interested in. Madden listened attentively, but the one thing of importance he learned was that Arthur Trepp had not asked any of them for permission to use their telephones on the day of his murder.

By the time he finished making his inquiries he had accumulated a list of twelve addresses where he had found no one at home. He would phone the people on that list, he thought; there were probably working wives, away all day, among them; if there were, Trepp hadn't used their telephones.

He hadn't used anyone's telephone, Madden reflected, going back to his car. It struck a false note to think that he would have called Alma Walbridge while he was still out on his route; he would have waited until later to call her. Someone else, impersonating him, had made the call. If Madden gave himself leeway in his thoughts, he could even say that someone had deliberately tied her to her telephone between seven and eight o'clock, leaving her without an alibi for the vital hour during which the murder had been committed.

The inspector went next to Woodside Avenue. The sun had set; it was beginning to get dark, and lights were already turned on in Alma's house when he parked in front of it. Muriel Hall came to the door when he rang. She was slow in placing him and showed no cordiality when she did, automatically grouping him with the police, the enemy.

He said, "I saw your sister this morning, Mrs. Hall, and she gave me permission to stop here and pick up some papers."

"What papers?"

"The test letter you wrote her last month, a list of the serial numbers on the blackmail money she paid, and the parcel-post receipt for the first payment." Madden's confident tone as well as what he said had its effect. He had been kept standing on the front step but now Muriel said, "Oh. Well, come in, Mr. Madden."

But she didn't take him straight to Alma's desk. She asked for details of his conversation with Alma and then said, "I'll get them out of the file for you," and moved ahead of him into the library. When she found the receipt, the letter, and the list where he told her they

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would be, Muriel's suspicions were finally lulled and her manner became more friendly.

Madden glanced at the date on the parcel-post receipt and handed it back to her saying, "I don't think I'll need this." There was no point in taking it since the other receipt in the Strattan post office had been destroyed. The list and the letter he put in his coat pocket.

Muriel, watching him, inquired hopefully, "Will those things help my sister?"

"Well, not right now. Perhaps in the future."

She walked to the door with him and on impulse said, "If there's anything else I can tell you, let me know. Mr. Madden."

"Thank you, I will." He smiled at her. "Good night."

"Good night." Muriel's eyes followed him as he went down the steps and out to his car. Like Alma, she felt hope stir in her because the inspector was working on the case.

Madden went to the post office and sat down in Mr. Buckley's office with copies of the Abbottsville telephone and city directories in front of him on the desk. He turned to the list of addresses where he had found no one at home that afternoon, matched them with names from the city directory, and added telephone numbers.

It was five-thirty, a good time to catch people home. He picked up the receiver and started dialing numbers. Within an hour he had succeeded in reaching ten out of the twelve names on the list and had received the same answer from everyone he had talked to; Trepp had never, during the week of his death or at any other time, asked permission to use their telephones.

By this time the post office was closed for the night, empty and dark except for the night light burning over the vault. The inspector let himself out and drove back to Dunston.

He went to his office. There he read the test letter and examined the envelope. He couldn't decide whether or not it had been tampered with. After some thought, he put it in a larger envelope, addressed this to the postal inspection laboratory in Washington and enclosed a note requesting that the laboratory let him know as soon as possible if the test letter had been opened and resealed. He also requested that the letter itself be processed for fingerprints.

He had dinner with another inspector, drove home to his apartment, and after a quick look at the evening paper he went to bed. It was only nine-thirty but his alarm clock was set for quarter of four the next morning. He intended to be on his way to Abbottsville soon after that.

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CHAPTER NINE

David Madden reached Abbottsville Center at twenty minutes of five the next morning. No one was in sight, no other car moved along the deserted streets, dim lights burning in the shops and offices around the green looked bleak against the outer darkness. The inspector parked his car in back of the supermarket and cut across the green to the post office.

He let himself in through the basement and used a flashlight to find his way up to the main floor where he had the light over the vault to guide him to the postmaster's office. In that room a door opened on a narrow stairway leading up to a lookout, a dark, closet-like place set in the wall, that commanded a view through a glass slot of the sorting tables and of the double doors at the rear of the workroom below. There were two other lookouts in the building; from one or another of them he could keep every section of the main floor under surveillance.

He took up his vigil in the lookout he had selected at five minutes of five. At two minutes of five he heard the front door open. Lights flashed on and Howell, the first arrival, came into view, yawning as he walked through the workoom to punch the time clock, taking off his cap and leather jacket and disappearing into the locker room with them. A moment later he was back. He went to the thermostat and turned up the heat for which Madden, in the chilly lookout, was grateful. Then he lit a cigarette — against regulations — and roamed the aisle between the sorting tables and the cases. While he was doing this the rumble of the mail truck announced its arrival. Howell unlocked and opened the double doors and over the clash of gears shouted good morning to the driver who was backing the truck up with precise calculation.

Madden watched the two men unload the locked canvas pouches that held the first-class mail, the canvas sacks with drawstring closings that held second- and third-class mail and parcel post, and the cartons and boxes too large to fit in sacks. Then the driver produced the registered mail in a sealed paper jacket. Howell and he bent their heads over it checking off the list of its contents. Howell signed for it, the driver put away the receipt, and they stood talking for a minute, the driver telling Howell proudly what a ripsnorter, what a handful his kid was.

It was twenty-eight minutes past five. The front door of the post office opened again and Roy Dutton appeared. He said, "Morning," and then, "Christ, you guys going to freeze this place out while you stand there gabbing?" and walked through the workroom to punch the time clock.

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"The hell with you," Howell retorted without rancor. "We got a right to talk if we want to." But by the time Dutton had hung up his jacket and returned to the workroom the driver had finished his story and was climbing back in the cab of the truck. "S'long," he said starting the motor.

"So long," the two clerks said, and as the truck moved off Roy Dutton, shivering, hastened to close the doors. "Gannon bragging about that kid of his again?"

"Well, you know how it is," Howell replied indulgently.

"No, I don't know how it is." Dutton grinned at him with conscious superiority. "I'm not roped and tied yet like the rest of you guys."

"Won't be long until you are if that doll you brought to Mike's Christmas party has her way," Howell said. "What's her name now? I forget."

They began to work as they talked, unlocking mail pouches and empting bundles of mail out of them on the sorting tables.

"Celia Robinson," Dutton said. "Cute number, isn't she?"

"Yeah. And her own apartment in Dunston, didn't you say?"

"Uh-huh. Nice setup. Privileges of home when I go calling. But marriage isn't what I've got in mind for her."

"Hah," said Howell. "I've heard that kind of talk before. It isn't what you've got in your mind, it's what she's got in hers that you've got to watch out for, my lad."

"Don't you worry about me," the younger man told him with a knowing grin.

They sorted mail with the skill and speed of experience, filling the compartments—separations they called them—in the cases and when they were filled emptying them on the carriers' desks where each carrier would sort his mail.

Howell, opening a bundle of mail, paused over an unsealed envelope, wet his finger and sealed it instead of putting it aside for the superintendent of mails to seal with an official stamp.

Madden, watching him, let out a held breath. Howell's action had suggested a starting point for Alma Walbridge's blackmailer. A letter from Lacostia that wasn't properly sealed, the snatching of a moment's opportunity to read it, dictated, perhaps, by curiosity about an attractive, socially prominent young widow, and something in the letter that whetted the reader's appetite for more information about her. Letters from Lacostia, Madden thought next, wouldn't be too difficult to single out. There'd never be enough of them—ten—coming in one mail to be made into a separate bundle. They'd be part of a train bundle made up of letters from various places.

Yes, he told himself, it was quite possible that the blackmail

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project could have developed from such beginnings.

The inspector, in his limited quarters, shifted his position and went on watching and listening to the men in the workroom below. In his early days in the service he had felt uncomfortable in the role of eavesdropper, but he had long since accustomed himself to it. It was part of his job and it had the saving note that post office employees knew the lookouts might at any time be manned by an inspector.

At six o'clock Jamieson, the superintendent of mails, arrived. After he had greeted the others and punched the time clock he went to his desk at the rear of the workroom and busied himself there for about fifteen minutes. Then he went to the tables and helped sort the mail. Presently, Roy Dutton headed for the washroom and was absent for three or four minutes.

There would be occasions, Madden reflected, when such absences would leave another clerk alone.

Just before seven o'clock the letter carriers poured in, breaking into the quiet with their footsteps and voices as they went to their desks to sort the stacks of mail piled up on them.

Just before eight o'clock when the postmaster would arrive, Madden left the lookout and let himself out of the building through a side door.

He had stopped at an all-night diner on his way to Abbottsville for coffee and doughnuts but they had been a mere stop-gap. He headed for a restaurant and ate bacon and eggs. Afterward he drove to the two houses on Trepp's route where he hadn't been able to reach anyone yesterday. This morning he found the two housewives at home and learned from both of them that Trepp had never asked to use their telephones. The last possibility that it was Trepp who had phoned Alma Walbridge was now removed.

He went in by the front door when he returned to the post office, found Mr. Buckley in his office, and asked to see the time cards for eighteen months back of the four employees in whom he was interested. He sat down with the time cards, took out his notebook, and began to make entries. Mr. Buckley looked troubled.

When he was finished with the time cards the inspector restored his note book to his pocket and said, "I think I'll have a word with some of these people." He left his hat and overcoat in the postmaster's office and went out through the finance department to the workroom. Howell, he saw, was on one of the windows. He found Steve Rodell sorting outgoing mail and Roy Dutton running it through the canceling machine. Jamieson, the superintendent of mails, was at his desk.

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Madden walked over to the two clerks who were working on the outgoing mail and said good morning to them.

"Good morning," they replied in unison, Dutton holding a letter suspended over the machine, Rodell, dark and morose-looking, turning from the sorting desk.

The inspector propped himself against a table. "I don't want to keep you from your work," he said, "but I am trying to clear up some of Mr. Trepp's activities."

"From what the papers say, there's a lot to clear up," Roy Dutton observed.

"It would seem so," Madden said while his thoughts went to what he knew of the two men from their personnel files and from what the postmaster had told him. Rodell, wife trouble, separated from her for the past two years—how much support did he have to pay her?—inclined to drink too much and to carry a chip on his shoulder. Dutton was single, twenty-nine years old, lived with an aunt who had brought him up. Mr. Buckley knew of nothing against him, of no reason why he should be short of money aside from making payments on a new car and showing some extravagance in the clothes he bought. But then he was a good-looking young man, Mr. Buckley pointed out, girls liked him, he probably wanted to make the most of his appearance.

The inspector's silence had become prolonged. Roy Dutton broke into it by saying, "None of us had any idea what was going on—did we, Steve?"

"I didn't," Rodell said.

"Well, neither did I. The other fellows say the same thing," Roy Dutton continued, addressing himself to the inspector. "Art was such a retiring sort of a guy. You wouldn't expect him to get mixed up in a thing like that."

The inspector looked at both of them, the voluble Dutton, the taciturn Rodell, and said, "The last time I talked to you Mr. Trepp had just been reported missing and no one here could offer any suggestions as to what had become of him. But now that his murder and the blackmail issue have come to light, I thought perhaps one of you might have remembered something he said or did that would have more meaning than it had then."

But both men shook their heads. Roy Dutton, continuing to take the lead, replied, "He never let on a thing to me. I couldn't believe my eyes when I read in the paper what he'd been up to."

"And you, Mr. Rodell?" Madden inquired.

Rodell made what was for him a speech. "If he didn't say anything to Roy, he certainly wouldn't say anything to me."

The inspector's glance, going back to the younger man, asked

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for amplifications of this statement. It was instantly forthcoming. "Steven means Art didn't do much talking to anyone but that I was on friendlier terms with him than he was, on account of both Art and me being interested in photography. We used to talk some about that."

"Did you ever see Mr. Trepp outside of working hours?"

"Not at all."

"Well, I guess I'd better not take up any more of your time," Madden said, removing himself from the table. "Thanks a lot."

"You're welcome," Roy Dutton replied. "Sorry we couldn't help you, Inspector."

As the latter crossed the room to Jamieson's desk, Steve Rodell said, "Roy, you talk too much."

"What d'you mean?"

"Just what I said; you talk too much." Rodell turned back to sorting the mail and wouldn't enlarge on his comment.

The superintendent of mails was a pleasant-looking man in his middle thirties, ambitious and hard-working. He had a good record in the service, he was married and buying a home, he represented the ablest type of post office employee. He talked to Madden at some length about the dead letter carrier but nothing that he said was pertinent to Madden's inquiry.

It was ten o'clock. Howell turned the window over to another clerk and was heading for the locker room when the inspector intercepted him and asked, "Are you taking your break now?"

"Yes, but it can wait a few minutes," Howell replied genially, and waited for Madden's questions.

However, like the others, he had no information to offer. He'd always liked Trepp, he said, his own wife and Mrs. Trepp had worked together on committees at the church, Trepp had never said or done anything of a suspicious nature in front of him.

Madden let him go, returned to the postmaster's office to collect his hat and coat, and went out the front door. Howell was ahead of him and got in his car to go home to whatever kind of meal, second breakfast or lunch, he ate at that time of day. His car was a Chevrolet, four or five years old.

Madden left and had lunch at a diner on his way to see Mrs. Trepp.

When he identified himself to her she immediately turned hostile. She stood in the doorway looking at him frigidly and demanded. "What do you want from me?"

"I'd like to talk to you about your husband, Mrs. Trepp."

"Hasn't there been enough talk about him with the police and that woman telling all kinds of lies and the newspapers printing them to blacken his name? What more is there to say?"

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"Mrs. Trepp, I don't know how much is true and how much is false of what has come out about your husband. I thought that if I had a talk with you and heard your side of it it might help me to get the facts straight."

Doubt softened her hostility. "Well . . . I've been through it a hundred times already. I guess once more won't hurt me. You might as well come in." She stood aside to admit him.

He let Mrs. Trepp tell the story of her husband's actions on the last evening of his life, listening with as much attention as if this were the first time he had heard it, inserting questions wherever they seemed called for.

Mrs. Trepp, when she came to the end of her story, launched into a denunciation of Alma and the Abbottsville police. Schreiner, in particular, drew bitter words from her. "I told him and told him Arthur never had any blackmail money," she declared. "I told him just what our financial circumstances were, he talked to the bank about them, he checked the dates of purchase on our savings bonds, I even showed him the canceled note for our new refrigerator that we finished paying for in November and I said, 'Would Arthur pay interest charges on a note if he had the cash to pay it off? But it didn't do a bit of good. Mr. Schreiner thinks Arthur had that woman's money hid away somewhere." She paused, made a despairing gesture, and added tremulously, "A better man than Arthur never walked the earth, and now he's not only had his life taken away but his good name as well."

"Nothing's been proved against him yet, Mrs. Trepp," Madden reminded her quietly. He took out his notebook and turned to the calendar sheet for November 1954 that he had inserted in it. November 15 had fallen on a Monday. That was the date Alma Walbridge had drawn the first blackmail payment from the bank and the same day, her postal receipt showed, had mailed it to Strattan. It should have arrived there by Thursday, November 18. Arthur Trepp's day off had been Tuesday and his time card disclosed no variation from it the week of the first blackmail payment. If he had been the Jonathan Chase who collected it he hadn't done so until the following Tuesday, his next day off.

Thus went Madden's reasoning. It left him dissatisfied with Trepp as the blackmailer. The timing was wrong since he was free to pick his own date for having the money mailed to him. He wouldn't have picked a date that left $2500 that was now his lying around the Strattan post office for the best part of a week; an uninsured parcel-post package, too, he would have thought, not knowing

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that Alma Walbridge had insured it.

Again Madden's thoughts circled around the fact that the murder had taken place around the time that the receipt at the Strattan post office, a piece of tangible evidence against the blackmailer, would be destroyed; and again he put the thought aside to give his attention to more immediate matters.

He asked Mrs. Trepp, "Do you happen to remember if your husband took a special trip anywhere on one of his days off about the middle of November 1954?" He eyed her closely as he added, "A trip to Strattan, Connecticut?"

Strattan appeared to have no particular significance to Mrs. Trepp. She said, "I'm sure he didn't. I don't think either of us ever went there. There was no reason we should. I couldn't even tell you just where Strattan is."

"Northeast part of the state. Do you remember your husband taking any trips that month?"

"Well, that's hard to say all this time later. But I don't think he did. He was painting the house a year ago last fall and he ran into rainy weather that held him up. He was afraid he wouldn't be finished before cold weather set in, so he painted every chance he got, days off and all, right through November. If he went anywhere, it wasn't to Strattan. What makes you think he went there?"

"Oh, I just wondered because some mention was made of it." Madden got to his feet. "I won't take up any more of your time, Mrs. Trepp. It was very nice of you to let me come in on you like this."

He called up Schreiner from the nearest phone booth. "You have a list of all of Trepp's friends and relatives whom you've questioned, haven't you?" he inquired.

"Yes, I've got a list."

"Do you think you could arrange to have them asked another question?"

"Lord," Schreiner said, and then, with resignation, "I suppose so. What do you want to know?"

"I want to know if one of them drove Trepp to Strattan a year ago last November."

"Strattan? Oh, you mean to collect the first—?" The police chief broke off and a moment later said, "Okay. But it'll probably take two or three days before we're able to see all of them."

"Well, do whatever you can on it, please. Thanks a lot."

The inspector hung up, turned to the telephone directory for the address of the local Mercury dealer, and wrote it down. Roy Dutton had bought a new Mercury within the past year.

The inspector went back to his car. He didn't start it right away. He took out his notebook and studied the entries he had made from the time cards of the four

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post office employees on his list. None of their days off pointed to any particular conclusion, he decided, since all four of them owned cars and could drive to Strattan in little more than two hours. But a man without a car, like Trepp, would, if he depended on public transportation, find the trip roundabout and time-consuming and would only be able to make it on his day off.

Madden put the notebook back in his pocket and drove to the Mercury dealer's where he identified himself and asked if Roy Dutton had bought his car there. The dealer said he had. It wasn't a cash sale, however. Roy Dutton had financed the car through the Abbottsville bank and was making monthly payments on it.

The inspector looked at his watch. It was nearly five o'clock, too late to go to the bank. He had a number of questions to ask there; they would have to wait until tomorrow.

The Abbottsville Trust Company was the only bank in the community, and the men on Madden's list all had accounts of one kind or another there. Rodell had a pay-as-you-go checking account; Jamieson, Howell, and Dutton had regular checking accounts; Jamieson and Howell also had joint savings accounts with their wives, showing deposits that went back several years.

Rodell owed the bank five hundred dollars borrowed six months earlier to meet a court order for the support of his estranged wife. His pay-as-you-go checking account showed a balance of thirty-five dollars. At times it had fallen as low as one or two dollars. Rodell, who drank too much, who was separated from his wife, who had received two letters of reprimand from the postmaster within the past year for infringement of regulations, was not a stable character, Madden reflected.

He went on to a study of Roy Dutton's financial position. His checking account showed a balance of a little over two hundred dollars; but the next monthly payment of sixty dollars on the chattel mortage the bank held on his car was due tomorrow and would reduce his account by that much. He would still owe nearly nine hundred dollars on the chattel mortgage after he met tomorrow's payment.

Last month Dutton had taken out a second loan at the bank in the amount of four hundred dollars for the purchase of a camera. The date of the loan held Madden's attention. It had been taken out on December 28, the day of Trepp's murder.

He turned a thoughtful gaze on Mr. Wesley, the bank official who was producing records for him, and asked, "Did Mr. Dutton come

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in to see you about this loan before the date on which it was made?"

"No, he got it the same day he asked for it, December 28."

"You didn't question his ability to handle it along with what he already owed on his car?"

"Well, he's civil service, single, no outstanding debts except the car, a good record in paying off past loans he's had with us. If you'll notice, I was the one who approved the loan. It was only three weeks ago; I remember the circumstances quite well. He came in after he got through work and asked for it. Seems he's a camera bug and he'd had his eye on this camera in Fraser's and he'd made up his mind to buy it, he said. So he got the money from us and I guess he went right over there."

Madden referred to the card that listed deposits in Dutton's account. "It doesn't show on here," he said.

"As I recall it, he took the money in cash. Maybe he thought there might be a delay in getting the camera if he had to have a check cleared through Fraser's and wasn't known there. After all, it's the biggest department store in Dunston. There might be red tape involved in cashing a large check if you had no charge account with them."

This seemed a straightforward enough explanation, the inspector acknowledged to himself. The date could be a coincidence. He didn't like coincidences but they did occur. There was nothing else about the loan to raise a question in his mind.

He asked next if he could see microfilms of canceled checks drawn against the four accounts.

"You mean for the past month or so?" the bank official inquired.

I'm sorry, but I'm afraid I'll have to make more of a nuisance of myself than that. For a starter. I thought I'd go back about six months; perhaps I'll want to go back even farther. I'd better have something to eat first. If I go out and come back at twelve-thirty will that be convenient for you?"

"Whenever you're ready, Inspector, we'll have a clerk available."

While Madden was having lunch he thought without pleasure of the afternoon at the bank that lay ahead of him. He might well be wasting his time too. He had no concrete grounds for suspicion of any of the men he was investigating. But unless he was wrong in feeling that there were too many weak spots in the case against Trepp to make it valid, then one of the men on his list, the only others out of the twenty-five employees of the Abbottsville post office who would have had access to incoming mail, must take Trepp's place as the blackmailer.

The five thousand dollars of blackmail money involved had to

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be somewhere. Although none of it had shown up on the financial statements he had examined that morning there was a chance that some of the canceled checks might take on meaning for Madden who had studied accounting and become something of an expert at it since entering the Postal Inspection Service.

At the bank he was taken in charge by a young man who was introduced to him as Mr. Benson and who looked just about old enough to have completed high school. He said, "Our film-storage vault is in the basement, Inspector. If you'll just follow me, please."

Madden spent the afternoon in the film-storage vault with young Mr. Benson running off film month by month back through May 1955. Then he said, "It's almost five o'clock, sir. There won't be time to run off any more tonight."

Madden sat at a small table with a snowdrift of paper around him, a sheet for each month on each account, checks listed by date, amount and payee. "That's enough for now, anyway," he said, and got up and stretched himself, flexing cramped muscles, yawning and shaking his head. "Quite a session, wasn't it?" he observed to the young man.

"I'll say it was," the latter agreed in heartfelt tones. "Wouldn't want to do it every day."

Madden laughed. "Indeed not," he said, gathering up his sheets of paper. "Well, thanks very much."

Madden headed for his car and drove back to his apartment in Dunston. He would fix his own dinner tonight, Madden decided, before he tackled the notes he had made at the Abbottsville bank. After coffee Madden turned to the notes he had made at the bank.

He began with Jamieson's account. For each month, back through the previous May, the deposits were identical—salary checks, nothing else. The inspector listed the canceled checks that turned up regularly; mortgage payment to a Dunston bank, a check payable to the Abbottsville bank that went into the Jamiesons' savings account, checks made out to the utilities companies, department stories, a fuel-oil company during the oil-burning months. He crossed these off one by one and listed the remainder on another sheet of paper. Insurance, the Community Chest, a garage, a miscellany of others, none for amounts that gave him pause. Superintendent of Mails Jamieson's account seemed to follow an orderly pattern of living within means, prompt payment of bills, regular savings.

He next turned his attention to the checks made out to cash, comparing them month by month by number and amount. Then he was

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ready to move on to Steve Rodell's pay-as-you-go account.

He worked on it as he had on Jamieson's, mentally shaking his head over the contrast between the solid position of the one man and the precarious state of the other's finances. Rodell was heavily in debt; that fact immediately emerged from a study of his affairs. He was juggling his debts back and forth, paying something now to one creditor and again to another in an effort to placate all of them. Eighty dollars a month went to his wife for support, ninety a month went for board. These checks showed up on each month's statement. The rest of his salary went to his creditors or to himself in checks made payable to cash. His chronic shortage of money was almost too blatant, Madden thought, as if to say, "Look, if I had any of that blackmail money, I'd pay up these debts of mine, wouldn't I?"

With this reservation about Rodell the inspector went on to examine the expenditures of Howell and Dutton.

It was midnight when he finished and got up from the desk rubbing his eyes, conscious of deep fatigue, of what a long and tiring day it had been. He was also conscious of hunger and went to the kitchen to see what he could find to eat. He didn't keep much food on hand, but there were crackers and cheese and some cans of beer in the refrigerator. He fixed himself a snack and sat down with it, his thought on the most noteworthy fact that had emerged from his evening's work, a scarcity of checks made out to cash in Roy Dutton's account. This could mean he was a tightwad who spent next to nothing on recreation or the many incidentals that made up the average man's cash spending; if it didn't, it meant some unknown source of money from which cash was drawn. Such as the blackmail money.

Would a man who had it in his possession have the self-discipline to hoard all of it for future use? Madden asked himself. It didn't seem likely, he reflected. It was either acute need of money or greed that had led to blackmail at the start; with either or both of these motives governing his behavior it seemed that he would be bound to spend some of his gains; and that however cautious he was in the spending, sooner or later some trace of it would crop up. Making out too few checks for cash from his legitimate income would be one way for this to happen. . . .

David Madden arrived at the Abbottsville bank the next morning at opening time. Mr. Wesley, the official whom he had seen yesterday, greeted him without enthusiasm, but Madden, who didn't expect cheers of welcome when he disrupted routine, was unper-

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turbed by the lack of warmth. "Sorry to bother you again," he said, "but I came across something connected with one of the accounts that I'd like to go into a little further. Could you spare Mr. Benson to show me some more film?"

"Yes, I guess we can take him off his other work."

A few minutes later Madden and the young man were back in the film-storage vault. Madden said, "I want to look at checks beginning about in June 1954 and bring them up where we left off yesterday in May 1955. But there's only one account I'm interested in, so it ought to go faster."

By the time the young man had run off the film Madden wanted to see, the latter felt that he was on the trail of something of consequence. In Dutton's account a normal number of checks payable to cash turned up each month from June 1954 to November 1954 when Alma Walbridge made her first blackmail payment. After that the checks to cash fell off and within three or four months only what might be considered a token number of them were being written.

Madden left the bank and went to the police station. Schreiner, when they were settled in his office, said, "Well, everyone we've talked to so far, Inspector about taking Trepp to Stratton says they didn't take him there."

"Oh," said Madden.

The police chief tilted his chair back against the wall and shook his head. "I don't know what to make of it," he said. "Frankly, I hadn't even started to check on how he collected the payment at the Strattan post office until you brought it up."

"I don't think he ever did collect it. And if not, he wasn't the blackmailer."

"Oh Lord," Schreiner said in dismay as he absorbed the implications of Madden's statement. Then, hopefully, he said, "We haven't talked to everyone who might have driven him to Strattan. Or it could be someone not on our list. For that matter, there's trains, busses——"

"I've checked his time card at the post office. I can't see when he could have gone by train or bus."

"He had a day off every week."

"His wife says he didn't go anywhere on his days off a year ago last November. He was painting his house at the time. Also, the date the money was due to arrive in Strattan doesn't fit in with his day off. It would have been there nearly a week before he could collect it. Does that sound right to you?"

"No. But we'll keep checking on people who might have taken him there some day after work. Maybe. . . " Schreiner's voice trailed off into dejected silence. His murder case looked less substantial

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than ever. Inspector Madden, investigating the blackmail letters at Schreiner's own request, kept coming up with new developments that cut more ground from under it.

But looking across his desk at Madden, the police chief, a fair-minded man, found himself harboring no feelings of resentment toward him. He remembered that Madden had never been as ready as he was to embrace the prima-facie evidence that Trepp had been Alma Walbridge's blackmailer and that she was guilty of his murder. If only Schreiner had paid more attention to the doubts Madden had expressed.

The police chief said meditatively, "Someone working at the post office was mixed up in the blackmail."

"I'm looking into it," Madden replied.

That was all he was going to say about it at present, Schreiner realized. It seemed that in the Postal Inspection Service they got every fact assembled before they came out in the open with anything. Maybe, he told himself, he should have taken a leaf out of their book.

When Madden got back to his office he learned that a report from the Identification Laboratory on Alma's test letter had come in. It said that the letter had been opened and resealed; that an overlapping of two kinds of mucilage had been found on the envelope and that neither was post office mucilage; that no fingerprints could be brought out on it.

CHAPTER TEN

The next morning after clearing up a query concerning a letter-box thief who had been apprehended by Madden. the inspector had lunch and headed for Fraser's, Dunston's largest department store.

Inside the store he went to the directory posted on the wall beside a bank of elevators. Cameras were listed on the second floor. He chose the escalator instead of an elevator, got off at the second floor, and made his way to the camera department. When a saleswoman approached him he identified himself and said, "I'm looking for some information about a camera that was sold here last month."

"Why—uh——" The saleswoman looked so much at a loss that Madden inferred he was the first postal inspector to have come within her orbit. "Will you wait just a minute, please?" she requested and hurried down to the other end of the counter to a gray-haired man who stood there. She spoke to him briefly and brought him back to Madden. "This is Mr. Birnbaum, our buyer," she said.

Mr. Birnbaum examined Madden's identification folder, seemed

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satisfied with its authenticity, and asked, "What is it you want to know, Inspector?"

"Whatever you can tell me about the sale of a camera last month on December 28, a cash sale that may have run in the neighborhood of four hundred dollars."

"Oh, in that case we have a record of it, all right. We keep records on all camera sales that run over twenty-five dollars. Miss Allen, will you get the ledger, please?"

The saleswoman, Miss Allen, got the ledger and laid it on the counter.

"The name of the purchaser?" Mr. Birnbaum inquired.

"Roy Dutton."

Mr. Birnbaum turned pages in the ledger, ran his finger along a page, and halted it. "Here it is, Inspector. December 28, Exakta Camera, $392, sold by Mrs. Everett."

"Is Mrs. Everett here? I'd like to speak to her."

Mr. Birnbaum looked at his watch. "Twenty minutes past one. She's left by now, hasn't she, Miss Allen?"

"Yes, Mr. Birnbaum."

"She only works mornings," Mr. Birnbaum explained to the inspector. "As I understand it, her children are on double session and she has to be home when they come from school, so she only works from nine-thirty to one."

"You mean she's never here in the afternoon?"

"That's right."

"There's no question of a mistake as to who made the sale?" Madden smiled in apology for pressing the point. "The time it was made doesn't agree with information I have on it."

"Mrs. Everett's number is on the record here. The sales slip is upstairs in sales audit if you want to see it for yourself. Or if you want to wait until Tuesday morning—we're not open Mondays, you know—Mrs. Everett will be here and you can come back and talk to her about it. She'll remember the sale, I'm sure," Mr. Birnbaum added. "You don't sell a camera in that price range every day."

Madden, who had no intention of waiting until Tuesday to talk to Mrs. Everett, said, "Well, I'll think about it. In the meantime, I'd like to see the sales slip. What floor is the office on, please?"

"Twelfth floor," Mr. Birnbaum replied, and Madden, having thanked both of them, buyer and saleswoman, took the elevator to the twelfth floor.

In sales audit the sales slip was located and verified Mr. Birnbaum's statement that Mrs. Everett, part-time saleswoman, had made the sale of $392 camera, a leather carrying case priced at twelve dollars, and five rolls of film at $4.95 each.

The personnel department

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checked Mrs. Everett's time card for December 28; it showed that she had left for the day at her usual hour of one o'clock. Madden asked next for her home address, and when this had been supplied he left the store and went to get his car from the parking lot in back of the post office.

Mrs. Everett lived in a suburb of Dunston. The inspector drove to her house and found her at home supervising the piano practice of a daughter about ten years old. The piano stood in the living room, and when Madden had introduced himself and told Mrs. Everett why he was there she turned to her daughter and said, "All right, Barbara, you go out and play now while the gentleman talks to me. But you be back in half an hour. You've still got twenty minutes to practice."

"Yes, Mother." The little girl flashed a smile at Madden that thanked him for her reprieve and ran out in the hall to get her outdoor things.

"Sit down," Mrs. Everett said, snatching a book and a box of crayons off the seat of the chair she indicated.

Madden sat down, and Mrs. Everett, a slight woman of forty or so with puckered lines of anxiety etched on her forehead, sat down facing him and said, "I do hope nothing's gone wrong with that sale."

He said, "Nothing's gone wrong with the sale, Mrs. Everett. I'm interested in what time you made it. Do you remember?"

She nodded emphatically. "I certainly do. It was the biggest sale I made all through the holidays, so I wouldn't be apt to forget. And quick, too. I couldn't get over how quick it was. Here was this young man showing up about an hour after the store opened and right off the reel he told me what camera he wanted. He said he'd been in two or three times before to look at it and now he'd made up his mind to buy it and he only had a few minutes; he had to get right back to work."

Mrs. Everett shook her head. "Just imagine," she said. "He spent all that money in five minutes or less. Because that's all the time the sale took. Five minutes or less. Of course he'd looked and looked at the camera the other times he was in, I guess—they all do, these camera bugs—but when it came to buying it he just sailed through the whole thing. He bought a case too, and some film, and took out his wallet—it was bulging, I noticed—and counted out all that money. My hand was shaking when I made out the sales slip, I was that nervous making such a big sale so suddenly and with no effort at all. I got his name for our records and he hurried out of there, the camera in the case over his shoulder."

That was Mrs. Everett's story.

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The inspector asked a few questions that dealt with the time of the sale. Mrs. Everett was quite sure it had been made not much more than an hour after the store opened at nine-thirty. Then, the puckered lines on her forehead deepening, she asked, "Is there something about the time that will affect the sale? We get commissions, you know, and if the camera is returned——"

Madden said, "I don't think you have to worry about that, Mrs. Everett."

"Then what has the post office got to do with it?"

"It's one of several complications in a case I'm investigating. Thank you very much." He stood up to go.

"You're welcome, I'm sure." She walked to the door with him. "As long as it's nothing that will affect the sale——"

"It won't." The inspector opened the door and stepped out on the porch. Mrs. Everett seemed impelled to explain herself further. Standing in the doorway she said, "My husband's in poor health and don't work very steady. That's why the money I earn is so important. Every penny counts with me."

"Well, don't worry about it, Mrs. Everett." Madden thanked her again, said good-by, and went down the steps.

During the drive back to his office the inspector's thoughts were settled on the significance of what he had found out about the camera. Mr. Wesley, at the Abbottsville bank, with the circumstances surrounding the loan to Roy Dutton quite fresh in his mind, had said that the latter came into the bank after work—that meant after two-thirty—on December 28 and explained that he wanted to borrow four hundred for a camera he'd had his eye on at Fraser's. He'd received the loan in cash and had announced his intention of going straight to Fraser's that same afternoon to buy the camera. All this took place four or five hours after the sale had been made, the camera paid for and in his possession.

It was possible, Madden conceded to himself, that Roy Dutton had borrowed four hundred dollars somewhere else on a temporary basis and when he went to the bank for money to repay the loan had thought that the whole transaction would be simpler if he pretended he hadn't yet bought the camera.

The obverse explanation of Roy Dutton's actions showed them in a very different light. He had bought the camera during his morning break on the day of Trepp's murder out of a sum of cash that he couldn't account for as part of his salary. Then, between the time that he went to Fraser's and the time he left the post office at two-thirty in the af-

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ternoon, something had come up that made it seem vital to him that he negotiate a bank loan to cover up the source of the money he had spent in the morning. He must have felt that returning the camera and getting the money back wouldn't give him as much cover as he needed, since his name and the record of the sale would still be on file at Fraser's.

In other words, Madden's thoughts continued, Roy Dutton had foreseen the possibility of a close investigation of his financial affairs; he had foreseen the murder of Trepp. He could have foreseen the murder only if he was making plans to commit it himself.

At this point the inspector's thoughts turned to Trepp, to what he had done that day to make himself a candidate for murder. One thing he could have done—during his break at noon, probably—was to have phoned Roy Dutton and told him about Alma's accusation that he was blackmailing her.

The letter carrier had been in an agitated state after he left her. But then, somewhere along his route he must have begun to calm down, to think over what she had said to him that indicated it was someone at the post office who was her blackmailer. This thought could have led him, during his break at noon, to phone Dutton and tell him what had happened.

If it had gone like that, Roy Dutton had moved fast in making his plans, impersonating Trepp in a phone call to Alma Walbridge at two o'clock, getting a loan at the bank at two-thirty. . . .

Madden was now back in the thick of the downtown traffic on his way to his office. As he stopped for a red light he reflected that he was moving pretty fast himself in building a case against Roy Dutton. After all, there could be some acceptable explanation for the camera affair. . . . But there was his checking account, too, with its scarcity of checks made out to cash during the past year. The two things put together would require a good deal of explaining away.

When the inspector reached his office he picked up the telephone and put in a call to Schreiner. He asked the latter if all the post office employees had been checked for ownership of a typewriter.

"Every single one of them," the police chief assured him. "There were two that had typewriters of their own."

"Who were the two?"

Schreiner referred to his file on the typewriter and named two of the post office clerks. Neither was Roy Dutton.

Madden thanked him and hung up. He sat back in his chair, frowning in thought. The prospect of launching a round of inquiries among Roy Dutton's friends and acquaintances did not appeal to

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him. Some definite starting point was what he wanted, some special friend of Dutton's, his girl for instance, the one the others had kidded him about while they were sorting the mail.

She had her own apartment, they'd said. . . .

Her name, Celia Robinson, was entered in Madden's notebook along with the other data he had gathered on Roy Dutton. He reached for the telephone directory and turned to the Rs.

She had a telephone listing. He dialed her number, and when a feminine voice came on the wire saying "Hello?" the inspector said, "I'm calling about the ad you ran in yesterday's paper."

"Ad? I didn't run one."

"Oh, didn't you? I wrote down the telephone number 5-9641 and I thought I had it right. Don't you have a typewriter for sale?"

"Well, my number is 5-9631. I have a typewriter——" It was now established, Madden told himself, that this was Celia Robinson on the phone, not someone else answering for her. "It isn't for sale, though," she went on. "You must have got the phone number wrong."

"Dear me, first time I ever got anything wrong in my life," Madden said on a bantering note.

"Time you did then," the girl replied, her tone matching his. "I'm wrong about something myself every day in the week and twice on Sundays." She was in no hurry, it seemed, to end the conversation. But then, Madden had a nice speaking voice, it was late Saturday afternoon, perhaps Celia Robinson had been alone in her apartment all day and felt a little bored.

He asked, "What kind of a typewriter have you got?—even if it isn't for sale."

"Royal."

"Standard or portable?"

"Standard. And furthermore—" she mocked him lightly, "I've had it three years but it's older than that. It was secondhand when I bought it—not through getting wrong numbers on ads but through a typewriter agency. Any more questions about it, sir?" This question was asked on a provocative note that pointed up her interest in prolonging the conversation.

Madden was just as interested. Celia Robinson, Dutton's girl friend—not too single-minded in her devotion to him, though—owned a Royal standard typewriter several years old. The blackmail letters had been typed on such a machine, and Dutton would have had access to the girl's. . . .

Madden leaned far back in his chair staring at the ceiling as he asked himself what he could say to Celia Robinson that would lead her to write him a letter on her typewriter. While he waited for an inspiration to come he inquired, "How's your typing?"

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"It suits my boss. How's yours?"

"Terrible. Two-finger system."

How could he get a letter out of her?

He said next, "That's why I answered your ad—only it wasn't your ad. I need some practice. I——" he stopped short as a way to get the letter occurred to him. Then he said, "What I really need is some lessons. You don't give them, by any chance, do you?"

"Depends."

Madden suppressed a sigh over this example of banality and picked up his cue dutifully. "Depends on what?"

"On who I give them to, of course."

"Well, what about me? I mean it. I'm not kidding one bit. I need some typing lessons. I just got a job as a reporter on a trade paper and I have to use a typewriter all the time."

"This is a brand-new line to me, mister," the girl said. "You better sell it fast because I've got a dinner date at six-thirty, and I've got to pin up my hair and press a dress and a few other things."

Madden assured her that it wasn't a line, that he was perfectly serious. "Don't forget, I called you up because I'm trying to buy a secondhand typewriter," he said. "I haven't got time to go to night classes; I have meetings to cover at night, but if I could get a couple of hours of private lessons every week——"

It was obvious enough that she hadn't the faintest interest in giving him typing lessons, but she was intrigued by what she kept on calling his brand-new line, she wanted to meet him; the claims of Roy Dutton, it became more and more apparent, rested lightly indeed on her.

At last the inspector said, "Look, will you do this much for me? Will you think it over tonight and drop me a note on it tomorrow?"

"Why don't you call me tomorrow instead?"

"Why don't you call me tomorrow instead"

"I'm going out of town tonight and I won't be back until late Monday. But if you'll drop me a note and put it in the mail tomorrow I'll pick it up at my box when I get back Monday night and give you a ring around dinnertime Tuesday. That's fair enough, isn't it?"

"I guess so. I'm not promising anything, however. Thing's so cockeyed. Perfect stranger calls me up——"

"But you will mail me your answer tomorrow?"

"Oh, all right, I suppose that won't kill me."

"Of course not. My name is Bill Watson. My address—have you a pencil handy?"

"Yes."

"William Watson, Box 885, Dunston. Don't disappoint me now, will you? I'll expect to find a

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note from you when I get back to town Monday."

"Okay," she said, "Have a nice weekend."

"Business," he told her. "Strictly business."

"I bet," she said mockingly. "By for now."

"Good-by." Madden hung up and let out a whistle of relief. "What a gal," he said to himself. "Dutton's welcome."

He hadn't dared suggest that she type the note. He had to hope that she would, after all the conversation on the subject. Regardless of that, it would be natural enough for her to type it. Most people who had typewriters and were accustomed to using them every day acquired the habit of typing their personal letters.

She certainly wouldn't mention his call to Roy Dutton, Madden assured himself. Why get the bird in hand mad at you over the bird in the bush? That would be how she'd look at it.

At six-fifteen that evening the inspector parked his car across the street from the apartment house where Celia Robinson lived and settled down to wait. The neighborhood was a maze of apartment houses with cars constantly arriving and departing from in front of them. Madden didn't try to watch for Roy Dutton's. He kept his eyes on the entrance to the building where Celia Robinson lived, and a few minutes before six-thirty the post office clerk came into view in the lighted area at the front entrance and stepped inside.

Presently he reappeared with Celia Robinson, who was small and blonde and pretty and talking animatedly to her escort. They crossed the street a little above Madden and got in Roy Dutton's Mercury.

It was a one-way street offering no problem to Madden of turning his car around to take up the pursuit. He followed them downtown where they drove into the parking lot of Town Hall Tavern, one of Dunston's most expensive restaurants. After the inspector had seen them go inside he went to a far less expensive restaurant in the same neighborhood for his own dinner, knowing that Dutton and the girl would spend considerable time over their meal in the leisurely atmosphere of Town Hall Tavern.

When they left it, the inspector followed them to the Wagon Wheel, a nightclub in the suburbs noted for its floor shows and its prices. Dutton, it seemed, spared no expense when he went out for an evening.

Madden watched them enter the night club and then went home.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

Monday morning when the inspector arrived at the Dunston post office he went immediately to the box he used for such mail as Celia Robinson's note, wondering if she'd sent it.

It was there. He could see the square of white through the glass before he unlocked the box. He took it out and eyed the typewritten address with gratification. Opening the envelope he found that the note inside had also been typed. It said:.

Dear Mr. Watson:
I really don't know what to say to your suggestion about private typing lessons. Guess I'll wait until you call me Tuesday before I make a decision on it. I'll be home any time after five-thirty. Don't start polishing apples for me, though, until you're sure I'm going to be—Teacher

The wording of the note brought a grin to Madden's face. Celia Robinson was playing it cagey, not signing her name, not committing herself to a thing with Bill Watson.

He put the note back in the envelope, the envelope in his pocket and took the elevator to his office on the second floor of the Federal Building. As soon as he was at his desk he phoned Schreiner and asked the police chief if he still had the blackmail letters in his possession. Schreiner didn't have them, he said; he'd turned them over to the state's attorney's office.

Madden went there and talked with the assistant state's attorney, who displayed much interest in his mission and agreed to let him borrow one of the blackmail letters for a comparison of the typing with Celia Robinson's note.

The inspector signed a receipt for the letter and taking it back to his office mailed it at once with the note to the Identification Laboratory. Then he sent a TWX message to the laboratory asking for immediate attention to the samples of typing he was forwarding by mail. After this was taken care of Madden left the room where the teletypewriter was located and returned to his office to catch up on other work while he waited to hear from Washington.

At noon the next day the laboratory sent back a TWX report informing the inspector that the blackmail letter and Celia Robinson's note had been typed on the same Royal standard typewriter.

The United States Commissioner's office was down the hall from Madden's. He went there with his information on Roy Dutton and secured a warrant for his arrest for extortion through use of the mails. Then, accompanied by a United States marshal who would serve the warrant, Madden set out for Abbottsville to pick up Roy Dut-

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ton before he left the post office for the day.

The inspector went first to the police station to let Schreiner know what he was about to do. He brought the marshal into Schreiner's office with him, introduced him to the police chief, and told the latter they had come to Abbottsville to arrest Roy Dutton on the blackmail charge.

Schreiner stared at him. "Roy Dutton? It wasn't—Trepp?"

"No."

For the moment the police chief seemed unable to absorb what he had just heard. "Roy Dutton," he said. "Why, he grew up in this town, I've known him since he was a kid, I've known the aunt who brought him up since before he was born. Well . . ." He sat up straighter in his chair and his voice became businesslike as he asked, "Anything I can do to help you, Inspector?"

"Yes, I think so," Madden replied. "I'd like to have one of your men come alone with us in plain clothes, Mr. Schreiner. We'll need someone to take charge of Dutton's car." He looked at his watch. "It's ten minutes of two now, and I'm planning to pick him up when he gets through at the post office at two-thirty. Have you anyone who'd be available right away?"

Schreiner nodded, picked up the telephone, dialed a number, and when it was answered said, "Sergeant? . . . The chief speaking. Will you come to headquarters immediately in plain clothes to assist on an arrest on a federal warrant? . . . Thank you," and hung up the receiver.

"He'll be right along," he informed Madden, and added, "I'm still very much in the dark about this, Inspector."

"Yes, I know," Madden said, and proceeded to give the police chief as complete a summary as time permitted of the evidence he had collected against Roy Dutton.

The police chief's face grew long as he listened. In a last attempt to salvage his murder case he said, "But Mrs. Walbridge thought it was Trepp. So she could still be the one who killed——" He stopped short as he saw Madden's eyebrows go up and then, accepting the fact that his case had gone out the window, he shook his head glumly and said, "No, I guess not. . . ."

At that moment Sergeant Bocca arrived, was introduced to the inspector and the marshal, and briefed on the impending arrest.

It was quarter past two. "I guess we'd better get started," Madden said.

"Just a minute, Inspector." Schreiner got up from behind his desk. "You're taking Dutton to the county jail?"

"Yes, but if you have any questions you'd like to ask him first ——"

"I certainly have! Bring him

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back here and we'll see what develops." Schreiner accompanied them from his office to the door of the police station. As he watched them get in Madden's car he said to himself, "Roy Dutton. For God's sake. I've known him since he was a little bit of a kid." He shook his head and closed the door.

The inspector, with the marshal and the sergeant, drove to the post office and parked in back of it next to Roy Dutton's Mercury. It was almost two-thirty. The three of them waited in silence for him to appear.

A few minutes later he came out the back door. As he crossed the parking lot to his car they got out of Madden's. He broke stride when he saw them, took an irresolute step backward, and came to a dead stop, his eyes moving over them warily.

The marshal walked up to him, his badge cupped in his hand, said, "Roy Dutton, you are under arrest for extortion through use of the mails," and showed him the warrant.

The young man's face went stiff and white. As the marshal's hand closed on his arm he made a move to free himself. The hand tightened and he subsided, standing stock still while the marshal put handcuffs on his wrists. He looked at them in disbelief and then turned his gaze on Madden.

The latter drove back to the police station with the marshal and Roy Dutton on the rear seat. Sergeant Bocca followed them in Dutton's car.

In Schreiner's office the marshal removed the handcuffs from his prisoner and sat down beside him while the inspector and Schreiner conferred at the desk, Schreiner was asking questions on how the inspector thought the murder had been planned and carried out, Madden giving him his reconstruction of it in detail. Then Madden said, "I want to find the money if any of it's left. Will you have the Abbottsville judge make out a search warrant?"

"I'll take care of it," the police chief said, and turned to the phone on the desk. When he had made arrangements with the Abbottsville judge for the warrant to be issued and had detailed an officer to go to the judge's office to get it, the police chief and Madden went in the former's office and closed the door. Roy Dutton and the marshal sat facing the police chief's desk. He settled himself at it and Madden sat down nearby.

Roy Dutton had had time to recover from the first shock of his arrest and met the inspector's gaze with a measure of defiance. "I'd like to know what this is all about," he said.

The inspector brought out cigarettes, passed them around, with Dutton saying, "I'll smoke my

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own, thanks," and then began, "When I went over your account at the bank, Mr. Dutton, I noticed that on December 28, the date of the murder, you borrowed four hundred dollars—to buy a camera at Fraser's, you said. Will you tell me about it, please? Did you buy the camera the same day?"

A look that was almost one of relief flickered across the young man's face as if Madden's opening question put him on sure ground. He was probably proud of his maneuvers at the bank, Madden reflected.

"Yes I did," he replied. "The minute I left the bank I went to Dunston and bought it."

"That was after work, after two-thirty?"

"Yes, I went right to the bank from the post office."

"Then that would make it somewhere around four o'clock by the time you'd received the money, driven to Dunston, and arrived in the camera department at Fraser's?"

"I didn't look at the time.

"But that would be about right, wouldn't it?"

"Maybe a little earlier. They know me at the bank. It didn't take me too long to get the money."

"But it wouldn't have been as early as, say, one o'clock, would it?"

"You know perfectly well, Inspector, that I was still working at one o'clock." The young man permitted the least edge of insolence to enter his voice.

"Yes, that's right. I also know that the saleswoman who sold you the camera works at Fraser's part time and left that day at her usual one o'clock. She remembers the sale and says it was made in the morning, about an hour after the store opened. During your break, Mr. Dutton."

The latter was silent. His eyes took on a glazed look as they met Madden's.

"Well?" the latter said.

"There's some mistake." Roy Dutton shifted his position crossed one leg over the other, let his glance drop to the toe of his shoe. "The saleswoman's got me mixed up with someone else."

"No, Mr. Dutton. I saw the sales slip, and your name is entered in the record book they keep as having bought the camera from her."

"Then she must have worked later that day."

"Her timecard shows that she left at one o'clock."

"I don't care what her timecard shows or what the record book shows or anything else!"

The inspector shook his head. "Mr. Dutton, you bought it in the morning during your break. After you'd gone back to work something came up that you were afraid would lead to an investigation of the financial affairs of the post office personnel. You knew

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you couldn't account for the money you'd spent on the camera and borrowed enough to cover what it cost. That fixed everything up nicely, you thought. But you made an unlucky choice of a saleswoman, and it won't do you any good to keep on saying there's some mistake in her records.

"Let's talk about the money you saved for the camera. Where did you get it?"

The young man looked sullen and disinclined to answer. Then he said, "Out of my salary, of course. I've been saving a little here and there for it the last couple of years."

"No, you haven't done that. I've gone into your statements at the bank and I've looked up your credit at the credit-rating bureau. Up until fourteen months ago you were chronically behind in paying your bills—and considering your salary, Mr. Dutton, you seem to have expensive tastes. Then, fourteen months ago at the time Mrs. Walbridge made her first blackmail payment your financial position suddenly improved. You began to pay your bills promptly, you were able to buy a new car last spring, and you're carrying a larger balance at the bank than you ever had in the past. But you haven't been saving for the camera out of your salary, Mr. Dutton. Every penny of it is accounted for in the bank's statements, and you haven't written enough checks payable to cash in the last fourteen months to buy your gas and cigarettes, let alone a four-hundred-dollar camera. Have you some surce of income we don't know about?"

"No, I haven't. I've been economizing, that's all. Cutting my spending to the bone. I saw I wasn't getting ahead so I turned over a new leaf."

"Like Saturday night?" Madden inquired. "Taking your girl to Town Hall Tavern and then to the Wagon Wheel cost you forty or fifty dollars, didn't it?"

Roy Dutton stared at Madden in consternation that the inspector knew so much about his activities. He was slow to answer, but at last he said in a flat voice, "That was something I do once in a blue moon. Special occasion."

"Will your checking account show that you wrote a check for cash to cover it?"

The young man's face looked gray and pinched. "I had the money on hand."

"Saved out of your salary—like the money for the camera?"

There was no answer at all from Roy Dutton.

The inspector got to his feet, walked across the room, turned, and faced him again. He said, "I've given you a chance to explain some of the evidence against you, Mr. Dutton, and you haven't been able to do it. I don't see much point in continuing this. I know,

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you see, that you blackmailed Mrs. Walbridge, that the money you've been spending so freely came from her. I may as well tell you that I secured a sample of the typing from your girl friend's typewriter and it matches the typing on the blackmail letters. You're not going to tell me your girl friend wrote them herself, are you? I'm sure she isn't involved, because if she had been, she's a bit too smart to have fallen for the method I used to get the sample from her typewriter."

Roy Dutton sat like a figure cut from stone. He made no reply, he didn't look at Madden.

The latter turned to Schreiner, who, with the marshal, had been listening in silence to the interrogation, and said, "Would you like to ask Mr. Dutton some questions now, Chief?"

"Yes indeed," Schreiner replied. He folded his hands on his desk and fixed a measuring eye on the young man. "Blackmailing Mrs. Walbridge led you into killing Trepp," he stated grimly. "Got you in deeper than you thought it would, didn't it?"

Roy Dutton stared at the wall over the police chief's head.

The police chief said, "When you tried to get a third payment out of her she didn't come through with it, did she? She got a little brighter and found out someone in the post office was blackmailing her. But she thought it was Trepp so she accused him of it the day you killed him. Then he called you about it. Whether he suspected you were the blackmailer or just wanted your advice doesn't matter. The point is, he called you and you talked him into keeping quiet about it for the moment. You told him you'd fix an appointment with Mrs. Walbridge and take him to see her that night and maybe get the whole thing straightened out. . . ."

Schreiner paused as Roy Dutton moved restively. But the young man said nothing.

The police chief went on. "You'd made up your mind you had to kill him right away, that you couldn't face an investigation of the blackmail. You'd signed a receipt at the Strattan post office for the first payment, and if Trepp got the postal authorities in on it before the receipt was destroyed you figured your goose was cooked. . . .

"So then you started to frame Mrs. Walbridge, calling her up and pretending you were Trepp and tying her to her phone that night between seven and eight when you were planning to kill him.

"To make the frame real good, you went to Mrs. Walbridge's—you'd wait till dark to do that—and scouted around her garage and got hold of the wrench drive.

"You were all set then for the murder, weren't you? You met

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Trepp at seven o'clock that night, you had the wrench drive ready, and you killed him with it. You hid his body one place in the woods, the wrench drive in another, so it wouldn't look like too much of a good thing to us. . . ."

Roy Dutton neither moved nor spoke. He seemed not to listen.

"Did you kill him in your car or did you make some excuse to get him out of it first?"

There was no answer.

"We've got your car outside, you know. It'll get a thorough examination. Was Trepp in it when you killed him?"

Silence from Roy Dutton.

"You dragged his body over some hard surface. The watch chain snapped, the charm came off it. Did you know that? Did it happen when you dragged him out of your car?"

Roy Dutton uncrossed his legs, set both feet on the floor with excessive care, and spoke at last. "I want a lawyer," he said.

Schreiner thought he was beginning to crack and fired question after question at him. The young man made the same answer to each one; he wanted a lawyer. The monotony of it wore on his listeners, but he himself seemed to find some solace in it.

Finally, stalemated for the time being, Schreiner went to the door of his office and summoned the desk sergeant. "Put Mr. Dutton in a cell," he said.

Roy Dutton, escorted by the sergeant and the marshal, was then locked up in a cell.

The police chief inquired of Madden, "Shall we go over and search the house now?"

"Yes, let's take care of that next."

The desk sergeant handed Schreiner the search warrant; the police chief told him to have a couple of men available to help make the search and named the men he wanted. He would call up to tell them when to come, he said, after he'd seen Miss Kingsley, Dutton's aunt.

Schreiner and the inspector were now ready to leave. The marshal would remain at the police station with his prisoner, Roy Dutton.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The house, painted white with dark green trim, was on one of the older streets of Abbottsville with large shade trees around it, a separate garage in the rear. It was a comfortable-looking house for Dutton to have grown up in, the inspector thought, as Schreiner and he went up the front walk, mounted the porch steps, and rang the bell. It was not the kind of place where you'd look first for a blackmailer-murderer.

The elderly woman who answered the door was heavy and slow-moving, with a deeply lined

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face and a topknot of white hair. "Why, it's Mr. Schreiner," she said. "How are you?"

"Pretty good, Miss Kingsley, but I've got a little problem on my hands. I wonder if I can come in and talk to you about it? Oh, this is Inspector Madden of the Postal Inspection Service."

"Postal Inspection——?" She eyed Madden in alarm, composed herself, and said, "Come in."

The room to which she took them was old-fashioned but pleasant. Her gaze rested anxiously on Madden as she asked, "Is Roy——? Is something wrong at the post office?"

"I'm afraid so," he replied.

"Roy's not home yet from work. I wondered what was keeping—— Well, what is it?"

Schreiner said, "It seems he took some money that didn't belong to him, Miss Kingsley."

"Oh no!" she cried. "Not Roy. You're mistaken, Mr. Schreiner. I brought that boy up from the time he was four years old, and I taught him to be as honest as the day is long. I used to say to him, 'Tis a sin to steal a penny or a pin,' and he'd say it after me cute as could be. He just woudn't have taken money that didn't belong to him. I didn't bring him up that way."

"I'm sorry, Miss Kingsley, but we have reason to think he did. We wouldn't be here otherwise, you know. We think some of the money he took may be right here in this house."

"Indeed it isn't!" Miss Kingsley exclaimed. "I do all my own housework, I take pride in keeping my house nice and clean, a place for everything and everything in its place, I always say. If there was stolen money hidden around here I'd be sure to find it."

"Well," Schreiner said, "would you mind if we looked around for it ourselves, Miss Kingsley? I know he wouldn't hide it where you'd be apt to come across it but——"

"It isn't in this house." She drew herself up straighter. "But if you won't take my word for that you're perfectly free to search all you want for it. You won't find any nooks or corners where the money could be hidden and overlooked by me, Mr. Schreiner. My house is kept clean from top to bottom. I believe in the old saying, 'Cleanliness is next to Godliness.' You look around all you've a mind to."

She lived by old sayings, Madden reflected. She'd brought Roy Dutton up on them. They couldn't have been the best diet in the world for a boy, any more than a maiden lady, whose first concern was a clean house, could be considered the best possible person to bring up a boy, regardless of how well intentioned she was. . . .

"Thank you, Miss Kingsley," Schreiner said. "May I use your phone before we start?"

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"Certainly. It's out there in the hall." She sat down, and Madden saw that her hands were trembling as she folded them in her lap. She looked at the clock on the mantle. "Ten of five. Roy ought to be home by this time and I ought to be starting supper. He'll be hungry."

She was talking to reassure herself that life would go on as before. The inspector looked at her with compassion but didn't feel prepared to tell her that her nephew wouldn't be home for supper that night or, in all likelihood, on any night in the future.

Schreiner came back to them. "There'll be a couple of more officers along to help us make the search, Miss Kingsley," he announced. "They'll start in the cellar and work up, and the inspector and I will start upstairs and work down. We'll try not to bother you any more than we have to."

It turned out to be futile. They examined everything, they searched with the greatest care through every room of the house, even, with trepidation, Miss Kingsley's kitchen, the least likely hiding place of all. They found none of the blackmail money and no trace of it such as a key belonging to a safe-deposit box or a bankbook from an out-of-town bank.

It was seven-thirty when the search was completed, and the four men met in the hall. Miss Kingsley was waiting for them. Her eyes were red from weeping.

"Do you know where Roy is?" she inquired of Schreiner.

"Yes, Miss Kingsley. He's being held at headquarters."

Her face crumpled, but she kept back a fresh burst of tears. "Will you let him go tonight?"

"I'm afraid we can't."

"But you haven't found the money you were looking for, have you?"

"No, not yet."

"I told you it wasn't here. How can you hold Roy at the police station when you can't prove he took the money?"

"We haven't searched the garage or the grounds yet, Miss Kingsley," Schreiner edged toward the door. "Besides, there's other evidence against him."

"I don't care what the evidence is, Roy never touched anyone's money. He just wouldn't do such a thing. The way I brought him up——"

Miss Kingsley was still protesting her nephew's innocence when they eased themselves out of the house and went around it to the garage.

They turned on all the lights and set to work. Madden and Schreiner began with the shelves that held cans of paint, insecticides, flowerpots, and a miscellany of other objects. One of Schreiner's men tackled the littered workbench, the other spread newspapers on the floor and emptied out a rubbish can on them.

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Schreiner, as he pried open a can of paint with a screwdriver, eyed the littered workbench and observed, "Dutton didn't take after his aunt in neatness, did he, Inspector?"

Madden made no reply. He was studying a can of dark green paint he had just removed from a shelf. "This one's been used quite recently," he said. "It's outside paint."

He opened it. No crust had formed on the top, and the drippings around the edge looked fresh. He stirred it with a stick. There was nothing in the can but paint. His glance went around the garage. "No signs it was used here," he said. "The house trim is this color, though."

The officer sorting the rubbish said, "There's some of it on this," and held up a rag coated stiff with green paint.

The police chief and Madden examined it under the droplight. The latter said, "This wasn't used just to wipe off a brush. It looks as if paint was applied with it; as if it substituted for a brush."

"Maybe Dutton used it to touch up some part of the house trim that he didn't have to be fussy with," Schreiner suggested. "Saved him the trouble of cleaning a brush."

"Could be," Madden said, but he went on looking at the rag with a thoughtful expression.

They continued the search. When they had finished with the shelves Madden said to the police chief, "I don't know about you, but I want something to eat. It's a long way past dinner-time."

"That's right, it is," Schreiner agreed. "We're not getting anywhere here, we might as well have something to eat and go back to headquarters. The men can finish this up."

"I hope the marshal's been fed by this time," Madden remarked. "Dutton too. After all, there are laws governing the humane treatment of prisoners."

"Don't worry, the desk sergeant's seen to it that they were taken care of," the police chief assured him. He then spoke to the other two officers about completing the search and followed Madden out of the garage.

The latter came to a halt in front of the house. "Let's ask Miss Kingsley about that paint job before we leave," he said.

They went up the front steps and rang the bell. When Miss Kingsley came to the door she looked at them wanly and said "Well?" without inviting them in.

Schreiner asked her if her nephew had been painting the trim lately.

"No, of course not, not in the dead of winter," she said. "Anyway, why should he paint the trim? It doesn't need it. The whole house was painted less than two years ago."

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"I just wondered," Schreiner replied meekly.

"Well, there's been no painting done around here lately, inside or out."

"Thank you," Schreiner said. "Good night, Miss Kingsley."

"Good night." She shut the door; they went back down the steps to the police chief's car and headed for a restaurant.

When they returned to headquarters Madden was pleased to learn that Sergeant Bocca had taken the marshal out to dinner and had ordered a meal sent in for the prisoner.

The young man was brought from his cell to Schreiner's office and the interrogation was resumed.

The hours of confinement had made Roy Dutton more recalcitrant, more insistent than ever on having a lawyer. He talked about his constitutional rights, he reminded them that this wasn't Russia, that he was entitled to a lawyer, that they couldn't get away with treating him like this. But he would not talk on the subject of blackmail and murder.

While the police chief questioned him Madden's thoughts went to Alma, whose prospects of early release from the county jail were lessening by the minute. At dinner the police chief had spoken with confidence of getting a confession sooner or later tonight, but Madden doubted that he would ever get one. Roy Dutton wasn't going to admit a thing. He must know he couldn't get around the federal case against him, but facing that was infinitely preferable to making a confession that would give the state precedence on a charge of murder.

Alma Walbridge's hopes had soared too high over what his investigation could do toward freeing her, Madden conceded to himself.

It was close to midnight. Roy Dutton had again lapsed into a stony silence that had now endured for the best part of an hour. Madden and the police chief left him with the marshal and went out to the desk to confer on the situation.

There was no point in continuing the interrogation tonight, the inspector told Schrener. The latter could question the young man tomorrow at the county jail.

"I got to do more than question him," Schreiner declared morosely. "He's not going to give an inch until I get some evidence to throw at him. You can't be sure Dutton hasn't spent every cent of it. Don't forget, it was him asking Mrs. Walbridge for more that started this whole thing."

"Yes, but I think he was foresighted and asked ahead of time. I don't believe he was down to the last dollar of what she'd already given him when he bought the camera or when he took his girl

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friend out the other night. I think he'd have shown more thrift if the money was about used up."

"Well, you got the serial numbers; you'll know it if you find it." Schreiner's tone was even more morose. He hadn't liked being reminded that while he had to begin a brand new investigation of the murder, Madden had his case lined up, had Roy Dutton under arrest, had a prior right to make an examination of his car or anything else that might pertain to the blackmail as well as the murder.

They went back in the police station. The marshal put handcuffs on Roy Dutton, and Madden took him to the county jail in Dunston.

Madden didn't get to bed until after one o'clock and then lay awake reviewing the events of the day. He told himself that his own case was well in hand, that the murder was no affair of his, but he couldn't separate the two in his thoughts any more than they had been separated in reality. And at intervals Alma Walbridge's situation drove other considerations from his mind. Her lawyers might be able to prevent her indictment for the murder, in view of Roy Dutton's arrest, but they couldn't, as things stood, clear her of suspicion.

These were the thoughts on which Madden, in the small hours, fell asleep.

He was up at seven, and as soon as he had dressed and had breakfast he went to Abbottsville, arriving there shortly after eight o'clock. He drove past Miss Kingsley's house, looking at the overhanging eaves, the wide gutters and window sills with a preoccupied eye, and went on to the police station. Schreiner, heavy-eyed and grumpy, had just sat down at his desk, and he regarded the inspector dourly since the latter was the source of the whole new set of problems that had come into his life.

Madden, unruffled by his attitude, inquired, "You still have the search warrant if we need it, don't you?"

"Yes."

"I've been thinking about that green paint. If Dutton got on to the fact that I've been around asking a lot of questions, don't you feel it's quite possible he decided he'd better take the money out of whatever hiding place he'd kept it and find a better one?"

"Yes, he might do that." The police chief looked interested in spite of himself.

"He could put it in some sort of waterproof case and glue it under one of the window sills or one of the eaves or gutters of the house or the garage. Then he could cover it with green paint that matched the trim and he'd think he had it so well camouflaged that no one would ever find it."

Schreiner got to his feet. "We'll need a ladder and a couple of

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men," he said.

When they reached the house it still wasn't necessary to produce the warrant. Miss Kingsley had had a long night in which to look back over her nephew's display of affluence during the past year, his carefree disdain of all the maxims on living beyond his means that she had quoted to him. She had aged overnight, but she was resigned to the worst and made no protest against what they proposed to do.

The search of the places Madden had suggested didn't turn up the money. Every inch of green trim on the house was examined, but no camouflaged package was found. As the men moved on to the garage Schreiner's grumpiness returned. He was wasting time on Madden's theory, he told himself, time that might better have been employed in looking elsewhere for evidence or in another interrogation of Dutton.

And then the inspector found the money. Wandering back and forth in the yard while Schreiner's men mounted and dismounted the ladder, the inspector came to a halt under a maple tree that stood near the garage, his attention caught by a ray of sunlight flickering on something green in the tree. He looked up through the bare branches and saw a birdhouse painted the same color as the trim of the house. . . .

Roy Dutton had smeared a coat of green paint on a piece of plywood cut to fit over the floor of the birdhouse; he had wrapped what was left of the blackmail money in a square of oilskin and secreted it between the original floor and his plywood addition; and with the money, in a fold of paper, was Arthur Trepp's good-luck charm, the two-dollar-and-a-half gold piece that was worth, the letter carrier had been wont to declare, between two and three hundred dollars. . . .

They went back to police headquarters, Schreiner wearing a beatific smile, saying over and over, "He can't get around that gold piece, he can't ever explain it away. Trepp had it when he left his house the night of his death. I wonder if Dutton broke it off the chain deliberately, knowing it was valuable? Or do you think it happened the way I said, with the chain snapping when the body was dragged out of the car?"

"I have no idea," Madden replied.

"Anyway, no matter how he got it, he can't ever explain it away." Schreiner fell into a contented silence, the beatific smile lingering on his face.

At police headquarters Madden called the United States Attorney to report on what had happened, while the police chief, on another line, phoned the town prosecutor to ask for a warrant on the murder charge.

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A little later the inspector said good-by to Schreiner and drove back to Dunston. His thoughts turned to Alma. It made him feel good to give his imagination play on how she would look, what she would say when she found out she was cleared of all suspicion and would be released from jail as fast as legal formalities permitted.

He asked himself, not for the first time, what she would be like without blackmail and murder hanging over her. Would she be good company, quick to laugh? Would she share his abiding interest in people, in all that made them what they were? He meant to find out. As soon as she regained her freedom he would call her up and invite her out to dinner.

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The fat man was a clever manipulator with a foolproof racket. He depended on the dishonesty of his victims and his own ability to recognize their potential. The young woman with the smudge on her check was, he decided, a gold mine . . .

MOUSETRAPPED

By NEILL C. WILSON

THE FAT MAN BOUGHT A Times-Gazette in the hotel lobby, took the elevator, drew a key, and went into Room 206. He opened to the want ads. LOST—*wax-sealed envelope. $200 reward if returned unopened. HEmlock 2332.*

He'd put that ad in. His eye traveled farther. FOUND—*sealed envelope. Contact Euclid Hotel, Room 206.*

A bellhop had carried that second ad to the newspaper for him.

The fat man lit an after-breakfast cigar and lifted his feet to a chair. His Times-Gazette was a well-edited sheet, not like that rag back in Syracuse. The phone rang. He lifted it. "*Good* morning!"

A rush of words. The fat man cut in, "You lost what I found? Meet me in the lobby of this hotel at 8:30. I weigh 250, brown suit." He hung up. The phone rang again. Broken English: "You finda da evlope? Sure mister, I losa heem." The fat man asked: "What's your name? Tony? Shoe shine stand at the bus depot? I'll be there at 11:55. Be sure to have $50." He winked a heavy lid to the mirror over the bureau. Tony would spend the morning figuring on a handsome profit on his $50.

More peals, more claimants. He scattered the appointments. "Coffee shop at 8:45." . . . "My room here at nine, but be prompt." . . . "You can't leave your shop? I'll drop in at 9:30."

The eighth voice was soprano-ish. A young woman's, in panic: "Are you the 'Found' man?"

"You mean the ad in the paper? Yes, ma'am, I am."

"Oh, how grateful I am!"

The fat man took his feet down. "What was that?"

"I'm so relieved! May I come for it right away?"

He was used to pretenders. But here was a dame who maybe really had lost something. Wallets and handbags do get mislaid. "Suppose you describe the article."

"It's a batch of letters someone

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wrote to me. I was taking them to a lawyer. Please, please don't read—"

The fat man's thoughts raced nimbly. This young woman was certainly shaken up. Of course the sealed envelopes he was handing around for cash contained only worthless stuffing; but if he had stumbled now upon a local pair mixed up in a naughty caper—"Meet me in the lobby here at eleven."

He hung up, feeling a tingle. This could be a real break. Meanwhile, to familiar business. He dusted his two-tone shoes with a hotel towel, picked up a portfolio holding several plump manila envelopes, and went down to the lobby for his first appointment. A seedy man sought him out and said, "Where's the envelope?" "Describe it," said the fat man. "Well, it's got sealing wax—" "What color wax?" "Why, red—" "All right, it seems to be yours. But I want a hundred bucks for my trouble." "A hundred! All I got's a two dollar bill!" "Go raise ninety-eight more from some bartender," advised the fat man curtly. He turned and went into the coffee shop. A shifty-eyed man sat down beside him at the counter and said, "Where's my packet?" "Describe it." "Well, it's an envelope." "What color, this envelope?" "Well kind of medium." "It's yours, I guess," agreed the fat man, "but you owe me a hundred bucks." "A hundred! Look, mister—"

The fat man studied him, settled for sixty. Shifty-eyes took out a wallet, paid and scuttled away with his envelope. The fat man watched with amusement. He hoped the stuffing of clippings about a basketball game at Syracuse would entertain the cheater $60 worth when he found that HEmlock 2332 was a bar, closed until 12 noon, where nobody had lost an envelope anyway.

At 11 A.M. he spotted the young woman sitting on the edge of a divan in the hotel lobby, her eyes missing no one. She sprang to her feet when his hefty bulk approached. "Where is it?"

The fat man led her to two chairs in a corner. He felt a warm sense of coming adventure. She was violet-eyed, pleasantly scented, neatly gloved. But plainly under strain. Her jacket was buttoned in the wrong hole and there was a black smudge on her cheek.

"Describe what you've lost," he said—a customary routine.

"I told you on the phone. It's letters!"

"What kind of letters?"

"Please don't keep me on tenterhooks! I haven't slept a wink since I dropped them somewhere."

A pleasing situation, perceived the fat man. What counted now was whether the writer was a well-heeled man. If so, one could squeeze a tidy sum out of that

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sender by simply pretending to have the missives. "Who were they from?"

"Oh, dear, then you're still making me identify them? The things Toodles put down on paper!"

Toodles.

"I can't *believe* that he has thrown me off this way!"

That fitted. She'd said she'd been on her way to a lawyer.

She clasped one gloved hand over the other. "To think that he always called me Oodles. He said it meant Plenty Of. I hate him, hate him!"

The fat man placed his hand over both of hers. "Lady, you don't need a lawyer as long as you've got me. How much were you planning to make him pay for these letters?"

The violet eyes lifted to his. Seeking counsel.

He patted her hands. "Why don't you and me split five G's?"

"It would kill him!" Pleasure began to tremble on her lips. "But it would punish him beautifully!"

The fat man squeezed her tailored knee. "Now then, his name and telephone number."

"It's Mr. Talbott. LEnox 5544."

He went to the phone booth. He dialed and asked for Mr. Talbott. A bored voice came on the line.

"Hi, Toodles," said the fat man jovially. "How are you this morning, darling? This is Oodles."

Silence. When Talbott's voice came on again, it wasn't bored. It sounded half strangled. "Who are you?"

"I'm speaking for one you loved and chucked. For poor trusting Oodles. How could you, Toodles dear? And how are you feeling this morning? Fairly rich?"

More heavy silence at the other end . . . or heavy breathing.

The fat man let him have it. "Five thousand dollars' worth?"

A gasp. Then, in a low-pitched, ratchety voice, Mr. Talbott's, "Just what do you intend to do?"

"Send your letters to the newspaper," said the fat man. "It's an enterprising-looking sheet. Or give them to you, if you get here fast. With the money, of course."

"Where are you?"

"Euclid Hotel lobby."

"I'll be right over in a taxi."

The fat man left the booth. To Oodles he said, "Don't you want to duck now, my dear? Come back at twelve." He'd be gone from town at twelve. Too bad the opening of that HEmlock 2332 bar at twelve sharp made his departure so advisable. He'd have liked to know this young woman better. But for solace he'd have the whole five thousand . . .

But Oodles responded firmly, "I'd rather stay and watch. A woman scorned, you know. I'll pop behind the potted palms."

She sounded determined. Well, if she was going to remain and demand her share, he'd at least make

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it contingent upon her accompanying him to Philly. Real possibilities there . . .

He lit a good cigar. He had it one-fourth smoked when a taxi drove up and a man entered the lobby with a quick stride. He was no fashion plate, but he was the executive type. You can do good fast business with the executive type if they're properly worried.

The fat man rose. "Toodles?"

"Where are those letters? If I ever get my hands on that vixen—"

"Where is the money?"

Toodles showed him a bank envelope. "While you open this, I'll open mine."

That wasn't the fat man's notion at all. "No, no. Oodles wouldn't want your letters opened in a public place. We must trust each other." The swap was made. The fat man could feel crackly bank notes through the envelope he received. He buttoned it away. From the corner of his eye he saw Oodles slipping out. She crooked a finger at him. His heart did a flip-up. He said to Toodles—Mr. Talbott—"And now, as I have another engagement, I'll just borrow the taxi that brought you here."

Toodles nodded. The fat man sidled out. He wedged into the cab. Oodles was in it. She said "Sh-h!" and pressed his hand. He felt twenty years slide from him. But at that instant, they acquired company. A policeman climbed in from the opposite side.

Also, but from the sidewalk side, Talbott climbed in. "First drop the lady and me at the Times-Gazette, driver," he said. And to the fat man, "My wife here is our proofreader. She reads every line of type we set. She read a wire story that came in this morning from Syracuse, and then she reread our Classified."

The fat man, who had started to rise, sat down again. The grip on his coattails forced it. He thought of a number of things, all unpleasant. The jails of this state were among them. But a softly laughing, violet-eyed young woman with printer's ink on her cheek was at the top of the list.

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The twisted wreckage and the silent forms beside it on the desert floor were all he remembered . . . until the fear in the girl's eyes and the blare of the radio told him he was a killer . . .

SILHOUETTE OF A KILLER

By T. E. BROOKS

THE THROB OF RAIN AWAKENED him. He could feel it drumming on his body, slapping at his face. Experimentally he pressed his hand into the earth under him. Wet sand grated between his fingers. A split of lightning showed an overturned police squad car nearby, its top in the sand.

He started to raise himself. The effort of getting up sent pain crashing through his head. He leaned back, moisture from beneath his eyelids melting into the rain on his face.

Then he realized that something had bound his wrists together and cautiously he tried to separate them. Apprehension, sticky with fear, crept over him. Twisting one hand back, he slid his fingers over the opposite wrist, finding the thin band of steel. His fingers touched the separating links. He was handcuffed.

Slowly, carefully, his fettered wrists stretched out before him, he rose to his knees. The noise of thunder suffused him with pain. He wavered, clutching the air with his lungs. Beyond him, the eerie configuration of the squad car loomed out of the darkness.

He pushed himself upright and staggered toward the car. On the driver's side, he made out two forms beneath the wreck, the uniformed officer who had been in the back seat, the plain-clothes driver twisted around the steering wheel.

There was no sound except the rain hammering the desert. He knelt in the broken glass and listened. Within the car was eternal silence. Crouching at the window, he groped for the dead officer's belt, his fingers closing over the key ring. He unsnapped it and drew his hands back through the window.

When he rose, the handcuffs and ring of keys lay gleaming dully on the shattered glass by the car.

He stumbled forward in the

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darkness. A hundred yards from the car he came upon a dark swath in the desert, the long body of a man sprawled face down in the sand. The man's dark suit squashed wetly under his hands as he rolled the body over. The face was a soggy mass of sand and blood. He straightened, confusion smearing the pain in his head, and plodded on.

Painfully, clumsily, time and distance passed. It stopped raining. The soft, clean glow of night infiltrated the blackness. A scatter of lights, widely separated and far off, came into view. He chose one and labored slowly toward it . . .

Inside the ranch house the girl stood before the bathroom mirror brushing her hair. Tomorrow she would wash it in the rain water. That would make it soft and silky. She frowned. It wasn't right for a girl to be alone in a house so far from neighbors. She hoped her father would get back soon.

She walked into the bedroom and opened a window. The rain had stopped. A few stars twinkled uncertainly in the sky. She started to undress, her glance catching the little table radio. She walked over to it and tuned in an all-night disc jockey, humming a little of the song he played as she slipped into her pajamas.

The ten o'clock news came on. Her fingers, working a button through a buttonhole, stopped.

"I repeat," said the newscaster, "a killer is at large. Confessed slayer Carl Johnson has escaped. The police car in which he was being driven to the scene of the crime has been found overturned in the desert ten miles from Palm Valley.

"Dead are: Sheriff's Deputy Al Kern, driver of the car; Police Sergeant Guard John Miller and Prosecuting Attorney Richard Wyler.

"The bodies of Kern and Miller were found crushed beneath the car. Wyler, sustaining head injuries and lacerations of the face and neck, apparently bled to death in an attempt to reach aid. His body was found a hundred yards from the scene of the wreck.

"Police theorize Johnson probed the body of Sergeant Miller for handcuff keys. Miller's key ring and a pair of handcuffs were found on the ground by the car. Tonight's heavy rainfall has wiped out all traces of Johnson's escape. A posse is being formed now for an all-out man hunt."

There was a pause. The newscaster's voice picked up again.

"A brief description of Johnson has just come in over the wire: Age, thirty-four; height, six feet two inches; weight, a hundred and eighty pounds. He is dressed in prison garb of gray denim pants and shirt. He is a killer. He is dangerous. To repeat: *This man is dangerous.* That description for you again, folks . . ."

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She walked over and switched off the sound. Then she switched it on again, tuning it low.

In the living room, she slid the bolt on the front door. At the kitchen door, she drew the long wooden latch over the doorsill. She wished, this time urgently, that her father were home.

She heated some milk in a pan. The music of a dance band drifted in softly from the bedroom. She drank the milk slowly and rinsed the cup. Then she started back for the bedroom.

In the hall by the bathroom door, she stopped. Fear pushed at the roots of her hair. She had left a light on in the bedroom. The doorway was dark now. The white curtains at the bedroom window billowed out with a light breeze.

Slowly, reluctantly, telling herself it was a burned-out bulb, she moved toward the room. At the door she reached in, feeling the wall for the electric switch. Light flooded the room. It was empty. Trembling with relief, she walked to the window and closed and locked it. She turned off the overhead light and snapped on a small bed lamp. A muted rock-and-roll beat out of the radio. Sitting on the edge of the bed, she bent down and took off her slippers. She swung her feet into bed and leaned back. The horror laced her eyes. A scream froze in her throat.

He stood tall in the doorway of the bedroom, a rain-and-blood-washed apparition in gray denim pants and shirt. Her hands flew to her face.

The scream tore from her throat, ripping at the pain in the man's head. He lunged across the room. She felt her head in his hand, his other hand brutal across her mouth.

"Don't scream," he said hoarsely. "Don't *scream!*"

Terror paralyzed her. His face was close to hers. A thick trickle of blood coursed a slow path down his jaw. She stared at the blood. *It's going to drop on me,* she thought. *It's going to drop on me.*

The pain in his head quieted. She was pretty, so white—like a wax doll before they add the human coloring. For a moment his confusion waned, yielding to a desire. His hand slipped from her mouth, closing against the side of her face. He bent nearer.

The blood was going to drop on her! The frozen terror dissolved. She flung herself from him.

"Don't scream," he said quickly, remembering the pain. The stunned look was back in his eyes.

She edged slowly off the bed. The radio blurted out a commercial. She stood up on the other side of the bed, desperate to run, to hide, somehow to get away from him. If she could get to the window . . . . She remembered she had closed and locked it. A shiver darted down her spine, starting a shaking in her body.

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"You're shaking," he said in surprise. "Are you afraid?"

"Wh . . . what do you want?" Her words came out in spasms, between the shaking.

"I don't know," he said slowly. He frowned.

"How did you get in?"

He looked at the window. "It was open," he said. "I'm sure it was open. I came in through it. The light hurt my head so I turned it off. I went down the hall." He looked back at her. "Did you close the window?"

"Yes," she said.

"Why?"

"I didn't know you were here. I—I closed it because I was afraid."

"What were you afraid of?"

"You."

A small light flickered in his eyes. "Do you know me?"

"No." The word brushed her throat.

"But you know who I am."

A new spasm of fear gripped her.

"Who am I?" he pressed. There was an urgency in his voice.

"You . . . you don't know?"

"No."

Hope spread cautiously over her fear. "Where did you come from?" she said.

"The desert," he answered. "There was an accident. They're all dead."

"What were you doing there?"

"I don't know. I woke up . . . handcuffed." Bewilderment cut through the dazed look on his face.

She fought a sudden wedge of compassion. He didn't know he was a killer . . .

The disc jockey announced a Dixieland band. She moved around the bed.

"Let me get a doctor," she said quietly. "You're sick."

"I can't let you get a doctor," he said roughly. "I'm a criminal of some kind. Don't you understand? I was handcuffed!"

She stood a few feet from him. She wasn't afraid of him now. A strange excitement touched her.

He watched her, the confusion lifting from his eyes. She was all he knew. She was here and real and soft beneath the flannel pajamas. The rest was desert and pain and dead men. And the vast expanse of nothing that was memory. He pulled her to him.

The frame of his body strained tautly against the wet denim shirt. She knew the rust-colored streaks in the fabric were blood, but it was *his* blood—and his mind was helpless, locked from its own evil. He was neither good nor bad—only a human being in need. Her resistance was instinctive, without real alarm.

The Dixieland tune ended. A man's voice broke urgently from the little radio.

"A killer is at large . . ."

She stiffened, charged with fear. He mustn't hear! She tore sav-

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agely from him, lunging toward the radio. He whirled, grabbing her arm.

"No!" she cried. "No! Don't listen!"

His hand clamped again over her mouth. When he had heard, he released her and walked to the radio. She saw the back of his head and gasped. He wore a skull cap of sand and blood. He shut off the radio and turned back to her, his face gray.

"I'm a confessed killer," he said, echoing the newscaster's words. He looked down at his denim-sheathed legs curiously, as if they belonged to someone else. His gaze reached back to her.

"You've known all along?"

A sob caught in her throat. "Your head . . ."

He towered over her. "Who did I kill?"

She stared at him. He still didn't remember. It had been in the newspapers. It was a senseless killing. She mustn't tell him. She remained silent.

"Answer me," he said. "Who did I kill?"

She tried not to whimper. "I—I don't know," she said.

A crazed look crept into his face. "Who did I kill? You know. Answer me!"

Her tongue quivered against her teeth, holding back the answer.

"I've got to know. Don't you understand? I've got to *remember!*" He paused. "What are you afraid of?"

She raised her gaze helplessly to his eyes.

A brief understanding crossed his face. She was so pretty, her pale face so soft, even in fear. Confusion sifted down on him again. He could almost hear the dull throb in his head. She wouldn't help him. She was afraid. He didn't want to hurt her.

He turned and crossed the room, walking back and forth. She watched him pace, her eyes dilating slightly each time she saw the back of his head.

"What—what are you going to do?" she asked finally.

He paused. "I don't know," he said slowly. His face twisted with pain and frustration. "If I could remember, I'd know what to do."

He looked at her in an agony of helplessness. Compassion gave warmth to her eyes. He was at her side, his hands gripping her shoulders.

"Tell me," he pleaded. "Tell me what you know. I've *got* to remember!"

She turned her head away. Futility and anger gripped him. He started to shake her, jerking the small body back and forth. She started to cry, her face crumpling like a baby's, the silent tears streaming from beneath closed eyes. He stopped as suddenly as he had started. Was this the way he had killed?

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"Get dressed," he ordered harshly. "And stop crying."

She made her way across the room. Clumsily, behind the closet door, she fumbled into her clothes. She emerged, her face flushed, her eyes still spilling tears.

"Does that wreck in the yard run?" he said.

She nodded, unable to speak.

He steered her roughly out of the bedroom and down the hall. At the living room door he yanked the bolt out of its slot and pushed her onto the porch, half pulling, half carrying her across the yard. At the old car, he opened the door and thrust her into the front seat, climbing in over her.

He started up the motor and backed out to the road.

"Which way is the nearest town?"

She pointed.

"Will you—for God's sake stop crying?" A stifled sob closed over her answer.

He drove in silence across the desert. At the main highway he asked again which way to turn. She motioned, and he swung the car up on the pavement. She wondered fleetingly where he was taking her. It didn't matter. She was only tired, so tired.

After a long time they approached the lights of a little town.

"Where's the sheriff's office?" he asked.

She looked at him in surprise, an unfathomable protest filling her mouth. She could see only the dark outline of his head and face silhouetted in the moonless hour before dawn.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"Turn myself in," he replied harshly.

There was a silence.

"I've got no choice," he said at last, softly, as if to himself. He spat a laugh. "I hope I know a good lawyer."

The car hit a hole in the road and jounced crazily. His fingers tightened around the wheel as the pain shot through his head. After an eternity they pulled up in front of the sheriff's office. The lights behind the lettered window whirled in his brain. Something sticky leaked into his mouth.

"I don't see," he muttered thickly, "how they can try me if I can't defend myself. And I can't defend myself if I can't remember. And I damn well can't remember."

He pushed open the door of the car and lurched out, staggering across the street. The harsh light from the window caught him and revealed the back of his head. The girl tore from the car, racing across the street. She grabbed his arm and steered him through the door.

A man sat behind the desk, caressing a coffee cup. He stared at the telephone by his elbow. A

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reporter from the nearby city lolled comfortably in a chair.

"Well, Joe," he said, "that about covers it. It started out to be a big night, too."

The deputy looked disgusted. "It's still a big night," he grunted. "I gotta round up—" He broke off, looking up as the man and the girl weaved into the room.

They stood for a moment just inside the door, the man reaching one hand to the wall to steady himself. He looked down at the girl. Her face was a white little island in the revolving room. It was a hard face to relinquish. *I'm a killer, not a lover,* he told himself grotesquely. He moved toward the desk.

"I came to turn myself in."

"What the hell for?" said the deputy.

"You're looking for a killer, aren't you?"

"No more we ain't, Buster."

The reporter was across the room.

"God A'mighty, the back of his head . . ." He peered at the tall man's face. "Hey, this guy's the prosecuting attorney!"

The big man slumped. The reporter caught him, staggering under the dead weight.

"It's okay, Wyler," the reporter said, lowering him to the floor. "Johnson put his handcuffs on you and changed clothes with you before he struck out for home base and bled to death in the desert. The call just came through. They've identified the guy in your clothes as the killer."

The white little island of her face still held steady in the whirling room. It was the last thing he saw before he closed his eyes—and the first thing he saw when he opened them.

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Another episode in the murderously inventive lives of Little Sam and Opal. It concerns a burning cotton gin, and "a skunk of the first water, steal your wife and ruin your daughter."

POUR ON WATER

by LEE HAYS

LOADED COTTON WAGONS WERE stationed along the street all the way from the burning cotton gin to the viaduct, two blocks back.

The children picked out the biggest load of cotton they saw among the wagons and climbed aboard. Opal kicked up a big bolster of cotton and he and Little Sam sat down. It was more comfortable than sitting on a brand new sofa from Sears Roebuck. They settled back to enjoy the fire.

"Them sheets of galvanized iron will be red hot in a minute," Opal said, "and then you'll hear some popping, like rifles going off."

Little Sam fanned her face with a strand of yellow hair. "It's too bad this ain't the Fourth and we could save our money and not have to buy no firecrackers."

"I couldn't buy no firecrackers anyhow," Opal said sadly. "This is boll weevil year and I don't believe daddy will let me keep a penny of the picking money. When it comes to a choice of saving money half a year to buy firecrackers with, or taking it straight to the store to buy salt meat, I believe I'd buy the meat and let the angels above supply the firecrackers if they wanted to."

Little Sam argued, "You eat meat and what have you got? A greasy face and a taste for more. But one good firecracker day will last you for a whole year."

"You had extra firecrackers last low Christmas," Opal accused her.

"I did," she admitted, "but I got severely criticized for letting off firecrackers on low Christmas. Proselyte Smith stood up in his pull pit and said anybody would do a thing like that ought to be stricken with the sprues."

"What are them?" Opal asked.

"I don't know rightly. I think it's something like the tee bees."

Opal said, "Mrs. Tatum's boy Earl had the tee bees. She kept him locked up, and nobody seen him till the day he died."

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Little Sam said with scorn, "You don't know much. Earl Tatum had the tee bees all right, but he was crazy to boot."

Opal lifted a bare foot and waved it to ward off a big flake of hot ash that drifted down. "That just shows how much you know. Earl Tatum just made out to be crazy so's he could stay out of the war."

"The war never drafted nobody with the tee bees."

"He was a draft dodger on principle," Opal explained.

"'Oh we're all dodging, dodging, dodging, dodging, oh we're all dodging out the way through the world,'" Little Sam sang. "Earl Tatum ought to have done what my cousin Peter Appleday done. He took and put on one of his mama's dresses and hid out in the corn crib till the war was over."

Opal thought about this for awhile. He saw with satisfaction that the metal roof of the big cotton gin was now red hot. It would fall in at any moment. Firemen and gin hands had saved some of the cotton, rolling the bales off the loading platforms to a far corner of the yard, but from where Opal sat he could count over a hundred bales too close to the fire to be saved, and already burning. There must have been as many inside the gin. Three wagons under the suction pipes were masses of flames.

"Explain this thing to me," Opal said. "It appears your cousin took too many pains to stay out of the war. He could live in the corn crib without the dress and his mama could say he was gone away ten thousand miles for to stay a little while. Or he could wear the dress and live in the house. Yes, and set on the front porch churning butter in broad daylight, if he shaved regular and maybe wore a sunbonnet. But there wasn't no sense nor need to do both."

Little Sam explained, "The dress was only so nobody would suspicion him if they seen him on the way to the back house."

"Oh."

"But he was purely glad to move out of that house. My aunt Appleday smokes cigarettes."

"Heppelker, peppelker, whitewash a sepulchre, and so do some other people I know!" Opal taunted her.

"Take the mote from your own derned eye, then you'll be as good as I," she returned loftily.

The roof of the gin fell in with a rewarding display of fireworks and much clashing and grinding of metal. The firemen fell back as burning cotton, smoke and red flame blasted through doors and windows. Fire columns belched upward and Opal had to wave both feet in the air to ward off the flakes which settled upon them.

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"Besides," Little Sam went on when the fire had settled down to a pleasant roar, "cigarette smoking ain't the worst thing about my aunt Appleday. She don't put no grease in her cooking."

Opal was shocked. "Is she a Yankee woman, you mean?"

"No. The county agent give her a pamphlet that said grease was bad for you and she fell for it hook, line and toenail, steal a fish and limp to jail."

"Well, I know the county agent is a Yankee," Opal said, "for everybody knows he voted for Coolidge."

"You ought not to go around slandering people like that," the girl chided him. "Proselyte Smith says you can burn in everlasting fire for less than that."

Opal squirmed. The inferno of the cotton gin was too suggestive of hell, as it was. "I guess you never spread no tales about people smoking cigarettes and leaving the grease out of their cooking," he said defensively.

"I don't consider it spreading tales to tell you a thing, Opal," she said, and the boy was comforted. "It made my cousin Pete Appleday mad, though, because she could smoke all she wanted to and he couldn't."

"Why not?"

"Too risky, in a corn crib."

"Nickerteens the throat, too."

"Oh, I don't know," Little Sam said. "I don't think they nickerteen a person's throat very much."

"Well, I took up smoking last year for a short spell," Opal said, "and they nickerteened mine. Doctor Billy Bob Henshaw stuck the iodeen stick down my gullet and swabbed me out and I was gaggered for a week. Couldn't tell if I was reamed, bored or drilled."

Little Sam said, "I wouldn't go to no doctor if he took and gaggered me."

"I had to go. Daddy smelled the nickerteen on me and he drug me there."

"You could chew coffee beans and the coffee beans would hide the smell," Little Sam offered. "That's what my big sister William used to do before she got sick and the doctor told her she had to give up bad habits if she wanted to get well."

"With coffee beans so hard to get?" Opal exclaimed. "Why, nickerteen trouble wouldn't amount to a thing compared to the trouble I'd have if daddy catched me chewing coffee beans. No ma'am, coat your throat with nickerteen, you'll have it swabbed with iodeen, and that's all there is to it."

"I never even considered that part of it," Little Sam said unhappily. "I know cigarettes will stunt your growth, ruin your pockets, burn your clothes, make a bugle of your nose, but you ought to have told me about the nickerteen."

"Well, I never knowed we was

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going to set up there and smoke and smoke and smoke! Or I would have told you."

He yanked up an overall leg and examined his brown skinny calf. "I don't believe I could stand to have my growth stunted much. I'm short weight as it is, with meat so high and hard to get."

Little Sam looked at the leg. "What is that mark there?"

Opal inspected the bruise. "It's an impress. I wouldn't be surprised if a trustle bolt done that. Toward the last I was purely hanging on by the skin of my legs, cut a snake's head off and he won't suck eggs. I got so sick I dern near fell out. You never got sick once," he complained.

"If you did fall out you'd land on a load of linters."

"Yes, and I might fall between loads, too, and have my brains strewed about."

The walls of the cotton gin blew out now, and the beauty of the holocaust claimed all their attention for awhile. Embers fell among the bales in the far corner of the yard and the burlap wrappings of many of them began to burn. Firemen tumbled the bales about trying to put out these new fires, but the damage was done. The bales would smolder for days.

"Well," Opal said, "I reckon daddy and me will be taking a load of linters over to the White Plant gin tomorrow morning. Boll weevils and all, I wouldn't be surprised if they paid as high as a quarter cent more than they were paying this morning. Of course that ain't much."

"It ain't as much as half a cent but it's twice as much as nothing," Little Sam assured him. "See can you get your daddy to give you some of them quarter centses for firecracker money."

"Meat," the boy said firmly.

The fire died down and presently the Negro driver of their wagon came and shooed them off. They walked back into town. People stood in little groups talking. A man said, "It was a bad thing for the combine but it will make the ridge farmers happy." He saw the children and said, "Howdy kids, did you see the big fire?"

"Yes sir, we seen it," Little Sam said politely. The man patted her yellow head. Little Sam hurried away, muttering, "Heap coals of fire upon your head and burn with envy till you're dead."

Opal matched her stride and the faster she went the faster he went. Presently he was pleased to hear her pant, "Don't hurry up so fast!"

"We got to get to Doctor Billy Bob Henshaw's office before he gets all taken up with post mortems and helping the relatives to identify the bodies and such."

Little Sam wailed, "I don't want to get iodeen swabbed!"

"Well, by dern! Hupty day and hupty doo, eat your cake and have

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it too! Do you want your daddy to know you been smoking?"

"I don't think a pack of cigarettes is going to leave so awful much nickerteen on a person's throat!" she argued.

"It'll leave twenty cigarettes's worth!" he told her. "Now Little Sam, it was you insisted we had to smoke and smoke, not me"

"Well, I told you about the law of probability," she defended herself. "We had to smoke and smoke, or go against the law of probability."

"That's true," Opal said reasonably, "and the same law says if you don't come with me and get iodeen swabbed you ain't got a probable chance in a million of not catching it when your daddy whiffs the nickerteen on you."

"All right," Little Sam said, "let's go get iodeen swabbed."

When the unpleasant gaggering was over, Opal said to the doctor, "That sure was awful about the fire, wasn't it?"

The doctor said, "Yes, but it might have been worse. Only one man killed."

"Do say! Who?" asked Opal.

"They think the manager got locked in his office and couldn't get out."

"I reckon he turned the key in the door to keep out unwelcome callers and forgot he'd done it," Little Sam said.

Opal said, "He wasn't so extra, no great loss to the community. I have heard him called a skunk of the first water, steal your wife and ruin your daughter, and he told my daddy no later than yesterday he would be giddly goddemed if he'd buy one more load of short staple, frazzled, weevily cotton. He was a mean man."

"It goes, pour on water, pour on water, sink your wife and drown your daughter," Little Sam corrected him.

They said goodye to the doctor and set out for home. They rode part of the way on the tailboard of a cotton wagon and then they walked.

Opal said, "What are you studying about, Little Sam?"

She said, "I was studying if I could remember something good about the manager."

Opal thought. "I can't think of but one thing. He'd let you go to the spigot where the cottonseed oil dreened out and catch the drippings in a loaf of store bread."

"I never tasted that."

"Not as good as cow butter, but better than humco. But if you sopped more than one loaf he'd give you a cussing. He was a one loaf man, meanest one in all the land."

They parted and Opal went home. Opal's daddy did not catch one whiff of nickerteen, but he did give Opal a licking for not coming home in time to help load the weevily cotton for early sale in the morning.

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The warp-faced man sat on the couch, his knife blade resting on Joanie's throat. Margaret watched in terror, reaching frantically for the words that could save them from this killer who talked of religion but whose eyes spoke lust . . .

THE VISITOR

By RICHARD WINKLER

SHE AWOKE IN THE NIGHT to a tiny flickering of terror, so faint she was not sure it came from a dream or from a noise that had startled her out of deep sleep. From where she lay on her side, facing away from the bedroom door, she could see the clock on the nightstand, its fuzzy, glowing hands pointing to twenty-five minutes after two. The house was fairly warm—when she came home from the restaurant at eleven she was so tired she had forgotten to turn down the thermostat—and in her sleep she had thrown off the sheet and the spread from the top of her body.

Suddenly she knew she was afraid, really afraid, and she did not know why.

Her name was Margaret Bancroft, and she was twenty-seven years old and had two children. Joanie, the one-year-old, slept in the baby bed in the dining room at the opposite end of the house, separated from Margaret by the length of the living room. Four-year-old Larry was in the small bedroom directly behind her own.

At twenty-seven she was still very pretty, looking in her sweet blondness, five years younger. She worked long, hard hours at the Elite Cafe & Restaurant to supplement her husband's income. Bill was a Sergeant First Class in the Army. They had lived in Germany when he was stationed there, and then they had come back to Chicago, where she had stayed when he was transferred to the West Coast. That was four months ago, when she had got the job at the restaurant and hired the babysitter for the children.

And now she was afraid, awakened in the middle of the night, so terribly afraid she could not bring herself to make the sound of turning over in bed so she could face the door and look out toward the hall. Margaret was remembering something.

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She had left her keys on the outside of the front door.

When she and Bill were together, she did this often, usually during the day, after she had entered with shopping bags in her arms. She would push the door shut with her knee and forget about the keys. Bill would come in after retreat, hand her the keys and bawl her out in a joking way, and she would promise not to do it any more. And she certainly hadn't done it often since she lived alone and came in at night. She had tonight, though, she recalled now. Well, it didn't matter, she could get up, get them and lock the door securely. Maybe that was what had awakened her, an inner anxiety about the keys. . . .

The house Bill and Margaret had rented stood almost at the end of a street in the suburbs. Actually, it could be considered *at* the end of the street, since there was nothing from the house to the corner except undeveloped lots, overgrown with brush and trees and high weeds now stiff and brown in the late fall chill.

Sometimes there was a street light at the corner and sometimes not, depending on how soon the city men replaced the bulb each time after neighborhood kids had broken it with rocks. She did not like the neighborhood very much, but they had very little choice when they were looking. They hadn't wanted an apartment because Bill had thought he would be here for awhile, in recruiting.

Margaret knew that sooner or later she had to—she must—roll over and face that door. She was reasonably sure nobody was standing there. The small lamp she always left on as a night light in the living room would have betrayed any strange or hostile shadow, gigantic and distorted on the wall she faced. And there were only the familiar shadows there; she studied them for reassurance. She strained every muscle in the effort to turn around so slowly there would be no sound. Yet she did not know why she should be so quiet, or why there was cold sweat on her hands and on the smooth skin of her stomach where her forearm lay across the open pajama top.

The walk home from the bus was what she always hated the most. It was a suburban Loop, end of the line, where she got off, and once she had left that circle of light she felt cast into outer darkness, swimming in the unknown, her own friendly shadow growing fainter and fainter and finally merging with gloom as she drew farther away from the light at the Loop, until she neared and passed the next cone of light, the first street lamp.

She had two blocks to walk before she arrived at her home, where the street light was so often shattered, cold and dark, as it had

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been on these last few nights, and then the trip up the center of the street until she passed the empty lots, and could enter, almost running, her own yard, where the porch light burned brightly, and it took only a moment to open her door to safety. The babysitter, old Mrs. Thomas, never walked; she took a cab, and Margaret paid for it. That was in the agreement. But for herself, with all the other family expenses, Margaret felt a cab a needless waste of money.

Now slowly, she began to turn over toward the doorway. She felt nearly paralyzed with fear, her skin crawling, the goose pimples rising as wave after wave of cold terror passed along the length of her body. Sweat burst from her armpits and she could smell it, sharp and acrid in the quiet air of the room. Margaret was remembering something else.

Three times in the past few weeks, she had felt that someone, or something, was watching her as she hurried those blocks to home. Were there really eyes peering out of the tangles of brush in the dark and lonely lots that stretched from her house to the deserted street corner? Margaret had known it was silly to think this. It was most likely just nerves, the effect of long hours and too much coffee on the restaurant job, and a crying need for Bill. But on the nights when the feeling was strongest, her knees were always trembling by the time she stepped inside her door and closed it fast behind her.

Turned over in bed, she forced herself to look at the doorway. There was nothing there, nothing at all. She had an overwhelming rush of happiness.

And then she saw it.

Whatever it was, it was in the living room, and she panicked into an uncontrollable shuddering. It was only a wisp of a moving shadow she saw, so slight she had to watch for it to make certain it existed at all. It was like a bird's wing brushing between the lamplight and herself. She tried to make herself believe it *was* a bird, but it was no use. She tried to tell herself it was Joanie, out of her bed and wandering in a sleepy daze, but Joanie wasn't big enough to climb out. Or Larry, it might be Larry. But she could hear Larry's troubled, slightly asthmatic breathing coming from his room.

If I'm quiet, it may go away, she told herself. Or if I pray, it may turn out to be Bill, home on a quick furlough and trying to surprise me. But Bill would not be so cruel—he knows how scary I am even when he's around. It may be just a bad connection for the light, or at worst a smartaleck kid nosing around for meanness. And they always say it's best not to surprise a burglar. But Joanie was in there.

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That was the thought Margaret had been trying to hide from herself, under the guise of being too sleepy to think about it. Joanie was in there, and it was up to Margaret alone, to step into the living room and see if anything was wrong.

The last thing in the world she wanted to do was get out of bed. By scolding herself, she managed to do it quickly. The bare floor was cool on her bare feet, and she buttoned her pajama top. She buttoned every button, and with legs that seemed too stiff and heavy to move, she entered the hall, looked into the living room, and threw her right hand up, to shield her eyes from the reality.

The door key, on its chain, was lying on the glass-topped table that stood between Margaret and the sofa. On the sofa sat a man, warp-faced and thin, with dirty clothes and a smudge of stubble darkening his cavernous cheeks. When he looked at Margaret, his eyes blazed yellow like a flame.

On his lap rested the sleeping Joanie in her blue nylon pajamas that so delightfully matched her eyes, and on Joanie's throat the man rested the blade of a knife.

Moving like a sleepwalker, Margaret made herself enter the living room. She had two rushing, tumbling thoughts that came together. One was that Joanie was alive, because there was no blood, and sleeping, because she lay so docilely in the man's arms. The other, so trivial she hated herself for thinking it, was that she was glad the weekday slipcovers were on the divan because the man's clothes looked dirty.

"Hello, Margaret," said the man soberly. "I call you by your Christian name, I don't know what the other is."

"What-are-you-doing-with-the-baby?" said Margaret. Each word came out as if she were reading from a primer. She noticed there was no tremor in her voice, and this surprised her because she was shaking so badly.

The man looked down at Joanie. He raised the knife for a moment, then carefully rested it in the same place. Joanie stirred ever so slightly. "I come here to kill you all," the man went on, not looking up at Margaret, "because that is the only way I can fix things up the way they ought to be."

"If you want money—" Margaret pressed him. He shook his head with such quick, frightening anger that she stopped speaking at once.

"It ain't got nothing to do with your money," he said. "You don't have none, you're just working folks like me. I come to kill your family, just like I done mine."

Margaret stood swaying, staring at him, fighting hysteria, thinking of the house and the desolate lots around it, the street

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light out. Even though there was the neighbor on one side of the house, she thought, how could she ever get help in time? A flick of that knife took only a second.

"Set down there," the man said, with a kind of grave country politeness. He pointed to the wing chair across from the sofa. "I want to tell you first about how this come to me as something I had to do."

"You don't even *know* us!" Margaret said desperately, her eyes beginning to blur as the tears filled them.

"I come to the caff-ay, and I see you there, laughing and talking with the fellers," said the man. "That's how I come to watch you, and puzzle you out, and how you're like all the rest."

Margaret looked at him, and she did recall something. A strange, silent, unkempt man who came occasionally to eat at the lunch counter—what she called to herself "the backwoods type"—a gaunt figure with a grey face and hollow eyes. But really a nonentity. She had never paid any attention to him, he was one of those nameless nothings that drift in and out, a voice asking for a hamburger, or the luncheon special, or a cup of coffee. Nothing. And now he was here to kill.

"We haven't done anything to you," she said, and a few tears welled up.

"Now stop that!" the man snapped, his eyes flaring to an intensity that made her shrink back. "I can't stand a woman that starts to cry, that's what they all do when they're caught, they beg and they cry, and they say they're sorry—What you wiggling for?" he said.

"I'm—I'm sorry," Margaret said. "I just can't help it, I . . . I have to—to go to the bathroom . . ."

He was plainly embarrassed at the words, and somehow enraged at the same time. "You shouldn't talk like that to a *man*," he said. "You go, and you come right back, and don't you talk like that."

Inside the bathroom, Margaret closed the door and turned on the water tap. She was cruelly awake, but her mind kept flying off into dim and shapeless thoughts, and her ears began to ring.

She wondered why she had come in here. To think about getting help, she said to herself, and her next thought was that she could climb out of the small bathroom window, run up the street to the neighbor's. And return to find Joanie and Larry dead, their throats cut. Then she really knew why she had come into the bathroom; it was in the back of her mind all the time.

The impelling reason had been to find escape for herself. Margaret was so panic-stricken, so desperate to save her own life, that she found herself cursing Bill for giving her the children. If

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they had never been born, she thought disjointedly, I could run now, run, run! Yet she knew she had to go back. She could not live herself at the cost of their lives. She leaned against the wall and covered her throat with her hands. Forgive me, God, she whispered, I haven't time to pray, I have to think.

One thing only was sure. The man had not killed yet, unless—unless he had killed Joanie since Margaret had fled to the bathroom. Her knees became weak. Since he hadn't killed them all at once, without warning in their sleep, he must have some reason for waiting. And if she could find it, perhaps she could turn him from it.

She must make a fight to know his mind. She could not make any mistakes. Not any. He had come to kill her and the children, not to be talked out of it.

The man did not look at her again until she sat down. He had not changed his position, and Joanie breathed quietly. He still seemed vaguely embarrassed, but it was overlaid with deadly calm. My goodness, thought Margaret, how did he know I wasn't going to get a gun?

"Your family . . ." said Margaret. "You said . . ."

"I killed 'em all," he said with a dry, rasping chuckle, and he shuffled his feet on the floor. "Had to. She was running around on me, soiling herself with men . . . here," he said, and dug into the pocket of his shirt, bringing out a long newspaper clipping. He handed it to Margaret.

It had been folded and smoothed many times, as if from constant re-reading. It smelled of tobacco and mildew. There was his picture. He looked skinnier now. There were the pictures of his wife and three children. Six, three, and two years old. He spoke the truth. He had killed them all, in Arkansas, and he was being hunted. He had murdered in August, and this was November.

"She sure was a pretty thing," the man said, interrupting her in a quiet voice that made her jump convulsively. "Give it back," he went on, taking the clipping away, folding it, and stuffing it into his shirt pocket again with his free hand.

"*Why?*" asked Margaret, and fought back the scream that crowded on top of the question. Maybe that's the wrong thing to ask, she agonized silently. If he remembers why, he'll remember why he came *here.*

"You ought to know. It was the other men," he said. "I started to tell her right after we were married. I was warning her. She was too pretty not to think about other men. She had those dirty thoughts in her mind about men, I could see it, and then when she went to

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work, it got worse and worse. She was a slut!" he cried.

"Did she—was she—where did she work?" The man's eyes were penetrating. For some reason, Margaret felt happy her pajamas were cotton, not the sheer ones she sometimes wore for Bill. She slid back into her chair slightly so the fabric of the pajama legs would loosen, and make less clear the curving outline of her thighs. "Was she"—her throat was hurting with dryness— "a—a waitress?"

The man shook his head. "She worked in one of them places does cleaning and pressing . . . *establishment,*" he finished, with an accent of pride at bringing up the word. "Sometimes, when the shoe factory let us out on our lunch hour, I used to go past, maybe on the other side of the street, or sometimes, when the sun was at the right place, I used to walk right past the cleaner's window real quick. I never told her I'd be there, and I'd look in, and there she'd be standing, and you could tell from seeing her that she wanted men to lust after her. And sometimes there would be one of these men she's waiting on. She'd give him a *look.* Or the other fellers going by, I'd see them look in to see her. It got to be too bad, it got to be something awful, her sinning . . ."

"But how could you know?" Margaret gasped.

"I brought it all up to her," he said, nodding his head with a wise, pleased look. "Oh, yes, I took it up with her. On the very night I did it. She was there in the kitchen and I took out the knife and she knew what I meant, and she got so scared she cried. She *cried,* and she *begged!* And then she fell down and went to kissing my shoes."

He studied Margaret with a twist of his head. "She must of done some awful bad things," he said. "To do that, kiss a man's shoes, for forgiveness. But she couldn't be forgiven, not ever, not for something like that. And the children too, then they were the product of sin, and a man has got to make things clean and right again."

There was a silence hanging in the air. He was waiting for Margaret to say something. What could she say now? The merest word might make him carry over his purpose now to Joanie, to Larry too, if the man knew he was in the other room.

"You have two children," the man said abruptly, as if he guessed her thoughts.

"You searched?" Margaret asked. "That was the noise I heard —that woke me . . ."

"Nope, didn't need to," he answered. "You told about 'em plenty times, down at the caff-ay. To that other girl. I made a different noise, to wake you up."

The house was almost com-

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pletely quiet when he stopped speaking. The yellow eyes contemplated Margaret. Now she heard that noise again. She was sure of it. It was the sound that had awakened her. An uncertain shuffling of the man's feet, as if he wanted to do something.

Why hadn't he already killed them? If she could answer that question, she might . . . The trigger to murder might be something she would do. Or say. And yet, saying nothing, she could not hope to learn the things in his mind.

Margaret clasped her hands so he wouldn't see them shaking, and asked a question with an obvious answer. "How long ago was it, your wife—and the others?"

He shook his head in a tired way. "I can't remember too close to the day," he said. "A month. A year, maybe. They been looking for me a long spell. Or they were. Maybe they give up. Although I never put no tricks in their way. I just picked up and went, and then I been living around, doing jobs. I figured if the Lord wanted them to get me, He'll call the time."

Margaret spoke clearly, and gazed directly at him. "Maybe the Lord wants it to be tonight." The eyes flamed briefly, but she hurried on. "Maybe He sent you here so they could come for you."

"You think I done right to a wicked woman?" he said. "You tell me!"

Her mind was a fox, getting cautiously closer, skirting the fringes of his mentality. She caught the chill scent of the steel trap, and backed away.

"You know it's never right to kill," she said, and in her voice was the gentle chiding note she would have for Larry, when he was bad-boy. She had the curious conviction, however, that no matter how he mouthed the words, the man was not really religious, and certainly no religious fanatic.

The man almost smiled, and looked down at Joanie, then up toward her again. "I was waiting for you to say, either way," he said in a rush of confidence. "To see if you agree with me, because if you do about *her*, then you do about *you*. But you don't figger it right yet, else you would be more humble. You would be scared, right scared. I'm still puzzling you out, why you don't act sensible."

"You know," Margaret said in a dreamy voice, leaning her head back and closing her eyes so he couldn't see them, "the police are probably in trouble about not finding you, and some of them could even get fired from their jobs. A while ago you said that you and I were working-folks. Well, so are they."

"You think you want to call 'em," the man said, "you just go ahead. I ain't keeping you. But you got some sins to answer for before, I can tell you, and the

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Lord is the one who put me in the way of you, and made me watch you, and follow you some nights. And tonight, your keys was still sticking in the door outside. That was a sign unto me, that it was to be tonight, for the wicked life you been leading."

Oh, please! Margaret cried to herself. She was thinking of what he had said before, and how he said it, in a kind of enjoyable, delicious re-living—"she cried, and she begged." Was that what he wanted her to do? Would that move him to pity, or to murder?

"What life?" said Margaret. "I've been a good wife, and I have never—"

"Oh, yes, you been a good wife!" he broke in with a cold sneer. For a moment hatred overcame her, but she fought it back. She must not hate him, must not fear him. Her only salvation was to understand. "You laughing all the time with those men who come in the caff-ay, smiling at them, and then they desire you. Like my wife. She was a virgin when I married her, and—" He did not finish. He seemed to be struggling not to say more.

"I was pure when I married my husband," Margaret said softly, and she knew at once that she had used the right word. She could see him relent, and his body sink back against the sofa. "And I have never thought about another man, ever."

"Not ever?" he said swiftly, shooting a look at her, and though she shook her head, she was afraid he could look into her heart. She had been always faithful, always true, but a woman, and lonely, and sometimes when she wanted most to be loved, the thought would, for a second only, flash across her consciousness—no, no, she said, catching herself, I must not think this, because this is what *he* wants me to think about, and he will know it, and will know that, and he will do something then, he is almost putting these thoughts into my mind, almost sending them across the room to me—

"If you have sinned and come short of the glory," he said, "you should die, and this sinful flesh—" he nodded toward Joanie, and raising the knife a fraction of an inch from her throat, he stroked the air several times with the blade, and looked at Margaret expectantly.

He had said, *she cried and she begged.* There was some warning in that for her, Margaret was sure, and she gritted her teeth to keep from pleading with him. "The baby must be getting heavy," she suggested. "Goodness, I—I know my arms would be getting tired, and I'm used to her."

He grinned. "You scared?"

"I didn't say that," Margaret answered, widening her eyes as if the question surprised her.

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"What if I kill her first?" he said, with his dry, short laugh.

Margaret did not trust herself to speak. The room whirled, and she wanted to throw herself at his feet, as his wife had done.

"With my family," he said, "I killed my wife first. I had to, because it was her had been egging me on, with her pretty ways, to make a man feel lust. I had to puzzle it out first." Now he stared at Margaret, held her with his eyes, and Margaret could not pull herself away from his look. "You are pretty, Margaret," he said, in the quiet voice of a shy lover, and then he chuckled hoarsely to himself.

Margaret felt herself weakening. It was like struggling for hours against a steel wall, only to have it turn without warning into an open door. She played with the idea; it seemed so comforting, simply to yield to him, give him her body, if that was what he wanted. Perhaps in this way he would forget what he had come for. He would be changed by love, or satiation, and would let them go, and leave the house. Afterward, she could escape him. She would quit her job and move, move at once, to join Bill, and all this would be over like the dream she thought it was on awaking. She considered him, his skinny body, grey face, his odor of mustiness, and in the thought of conquering through consent there was an almost unconscious, guilty twinge of carnality, because it had been so long since she had Bill's love. Her next thought, that *she* should have, even for a moment, and for whatever reason, any desire for this man, shocked and sickened her.

It was then she realized what was happening. His mind was reaching out to hers, and the tortured intensity of his desire was probing her barriers, seeking the opening, forcing her to make the move.

Yes! that was it—forcing her to make the first move. The word, the gesture—any sign, however slight, that would release him, give him permission . . .

At that moment he lost her. She eluded his voiceless commands, and her mind, sharpened a thousandfold by fear, slipped inside his consciousness. And saw, or felt, his terrible secret.

It was the one thing that could end her life, or free them all.

He said he killed his wife first, and the children afterward. He said she cried and she begged. He frightened Margaret by awakening her and threatening Joanie, and hoped in this way to hear the hysterical submission that would set off the chain reaction of his real purpose. When this failed, he resorted to maneuvering, hinting, barely hinting by his tone and his words that if she would offer, he would take.

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He did want her body, then! That was what he had come for. That was what he had planned those times (how many?) when he sat unnoticed in the cafe, and those nights he followed her, or watched her from the underbrush beside the road.

But he did not know this truth about himself, and so he would not make the first move at this exact moment. Because desire, to him, was sin, he needed expiation. And murder then became the cleansing crime. Why, Margaret reasoned, in a flood tide of understanding, even the love he held for his wife could never at any time have been free of guilt, and the more he loved her physically, the more his anguished mind would twist and turn so he could hold her to account for his body's cravings.

The question, "You are pretty Margaret," and it was a question, still waited an answer as plainly as if it had been inscribed in the air between them.

Speaking again with the image of bad-boy Larry in her mind, Margaret said severely, "You must not say that to another man's wife! And you must not call me Margaret. *You* know better than that. My name is Mrs. Bancroft."

Whether it was momentary or not, she had cowed him. He licked his lips in a sneaking admission of shame. Then he turned sullen. "I told you before, I never knew nothing but your Christian name," he said.

"Well, now you know differently," said Margaret. "And if you don't mind, I'm going to make that call now."

She waited a full minute. He did not move, except for the saffron eyes. Furtively they flicked up and down her body. Praying inside, Margaret rose without haste and walked into the hall, to the telephone. Her back was to the man and Joanie on the sofa, and she lifted the receiver, whispering to the operator, "Emergency! Give me the police, please."

She tried to keep her voice very low when a man's voice answered. "I live at 1264 Lawton," she said. "There is a man here who killed his family, and he would like to give himself up. Please come now—he has a knife—and *don't* use your siren."

There was movement behind her in the living room. She was almost too frightened to turn around. What if—Joanie—

The man said with petulant rage, "I never said I'd *like* to give myself up. You lied to them fellers."

She had not thought he could hear her voice, so quietly had she spoken into the phone. By the sound of his voice, he was standing in the center of the living room. Slowly she turned around.

Joanie lay, awkwardly sprawled,

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across the seat of the wing chair where Margaret had been sitting. Her legs dangled down. It was the clumsy effort of a man placing a child, but Joanie slept despite it all.

"Come back in here, Margaret," the man ordered her. "And *you* set here with me now, like I should have done in the first place." He sat down again, and pointed with his knife to the cushion beside him.

"My name," said Margaret, "is Mrs. Bancroft—*and*" she added quickly as she saw him tense, "I *will* sit there, but first I must put Joanie in her bed." She swept up the child and walked into the dining room. She laid Joanie in her baby bed, seeing on the tender neck the impress of the knife blade. Joanie whimpered just a little on being laid down, and Margaret patted her to quiet her. As she turned away, the man stood beside her.

"You must not touch me," said Margaret, back in the living room, "with the knife or anything else. I am a *good* woman, and I do not want any other man to touch me besides my husband."

The man was very close beside her, almost touching. "Set down," he said.

Now, in the silent room, sitting close together on the sofa, Margaret and the man heard the police car drive up outside the house. Thank God, she thought, they have not used the siren. She was not absolutely sure the man had heard the car. For several minutes, his expression had not changed.

He was staring at her from those yellow eyes, and his eyes did not leave her face even for a second. Again he seemed to be puzzling something out. His inhibition toward her, which she had built so carefully, seemed to be ebbing away. She was more than ever conscious of his maleness as he held the knife firmly, pointed at her body.

The flasher signal on the police car sent whirling beams of blood-red light through the closed venetian blinds. Margaret, studying the man only from the periphery of her vision—she dared not turn her head directly toward him—felt a ripple run through him, like an electrical charge.

Despairingly, she recognized what was exciting him: her female odor. She had been too tired to wash when she had gone to bed that night, and now heavy sweating was enlivening the remnants of yesterday's perfume.

He seemed to be experiencing a fluctuation in the deeps of his mind. Something dark and terrible was bubbling and rising, striking for the surface as a blind thing leaps from the black lake within a cave. Instantly she knew, with the primal instinct of a dying prey, that he would never sit un-

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moving when the police came through that door. He would act, and the act would be to kill.

So Margaret, her children safe, made this move for herself alone. She wanted so much to live, to escape, oh Jesus God to see the day once more! She made her last small move, and almost won.

"Maybe you'd better give me the knife now," she said, "before your friends, the working-men just like you, come in." Without looking at him she said, "Please drop it in my lap."

But he was already sounding his dry chuckle. His body tensed like a snake's, and his feet performed their peculiar shuffle on the rug.

"I'll give it to you, Margaret," he said. "Right in your nice soft belly."

He drove with the knife, and her arm dropped down. Again it was instinct, the final terror of the victim moving blindly to protect itself.

The knife entered her arm just below the elbow. Now Margaret could scream. It was like a keen and biting pleasure to have the knife sink home at last so she could split the night with horror's sound.

The police—there were three—beat him to the floor. He leaped up. One struck him on the head with the gun barrel, and he fell back upon the sofa, his thin face writhing, his skinny legs sagging wide. Yet so hard had Margaret struggled to understand him through the night, so fiercely had she striven to enter his mind, be one with him, and thus protect her children and herself, that even now there rose in her that strange feeling toward him, intensely intimate, almost sweetly passionate.

"Don't hurt him, don't hurt him," she said. "He has some very bad trouble in his mind," and then the tears rushed into her eyes.

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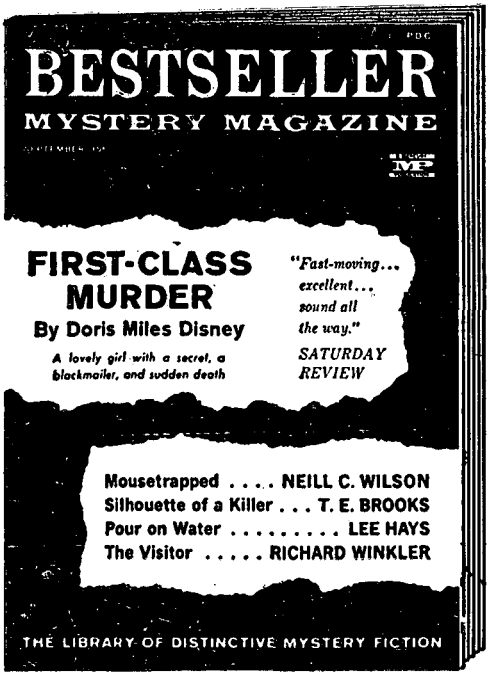
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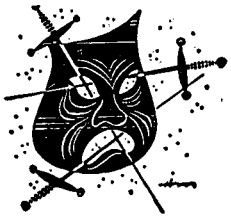

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